

America

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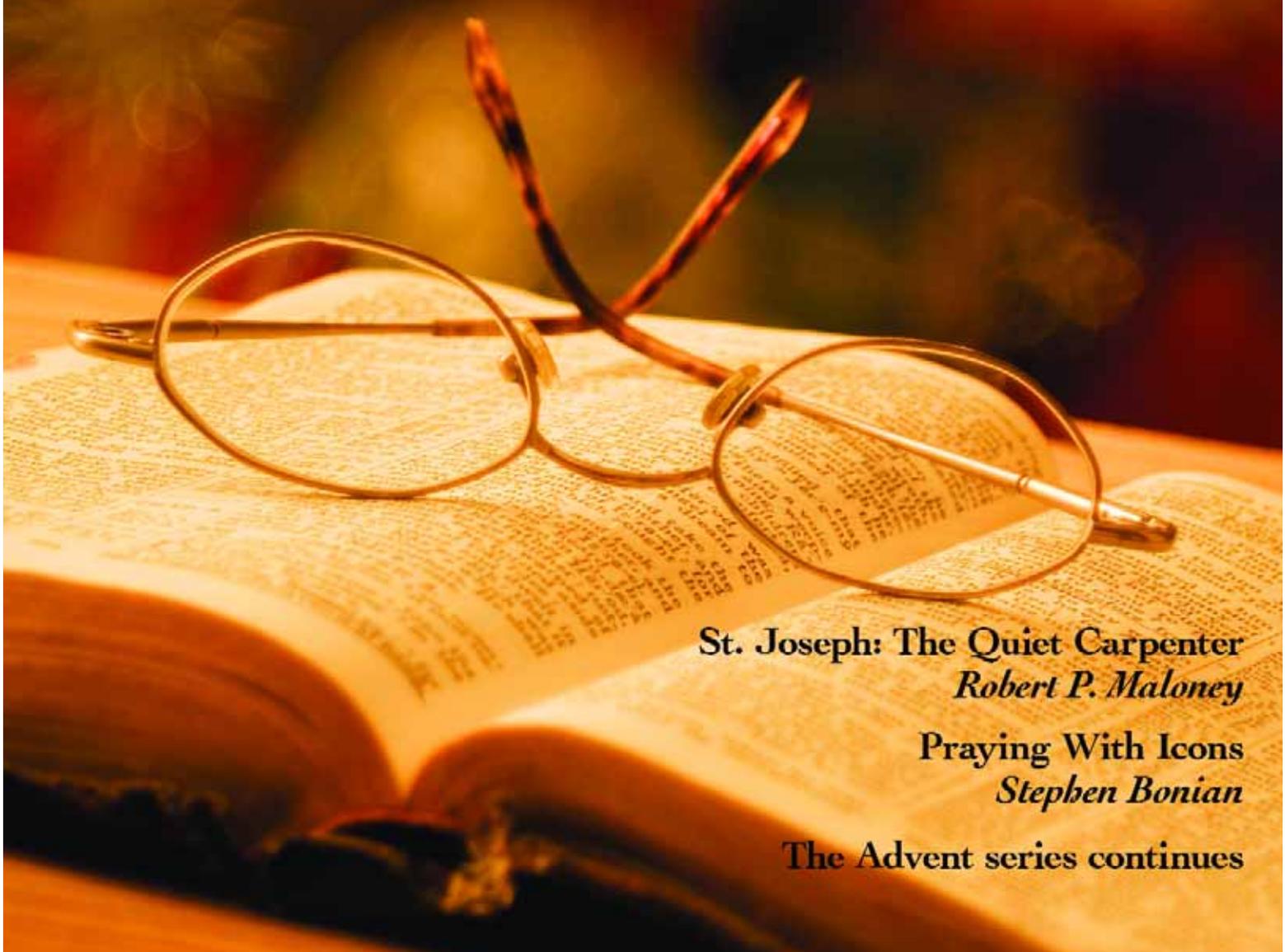
Dec. 8, 2008

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

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Do Catholics Read the Bible?

David Gibson



St. Joseph: The Quiet Carpenter
Robert P. Maloney

Praying With Icons
Stephen Bonian

The Advent series continues

GLOBALIZATION has in the last few years become a political and socio-economic buzzword loaded with both positive and negative connotations. Jobs going south; world solidarity; economic interdependence; cooperation; exploitation. Perhaps at no time in the history of **America** magazine has the consciousness of the editors been more global. Whether by an accident of history or the work of the Holy Spirit, at the present time eight members of our Jesuit community at America House, including four editors, have spent lengthy periods working in what were once called the foreign missions. Their experiences and memories enliven and broaden our conversations and cause us to be especially aware of the needs of the third world in which they worked.

Four men went to the Philippines when they were at the age of 21. They were inserted into an Asian culture, but it was an Asian Catholic culture that was heavily influenced by both Spain and the United States. They worked

alongside men who had been imprisoned by the Japanese in internment camps during World War II. They saw the growing influence of nationalism among their indigenous Jesuit brothers. They were aware of the Moro rebellion, which still festers today, in the south of the country.

One editor went to East Africa when he was only somewhat older than the island missionaries had been. Working in Kenya to assimilate refugees from neighboring countries who had been displaced by wars and tribal violence, he saw firsthand the devastating effects of the Rwandan genocide. The Muslim influence is also significant in all the countries of East Africa, and it is dominant in Sudan. The perspective of someone who has seen both religious rivalry and cooperation, not to say tribal reconciliation despite longstanding antipathies, is invaluable to us.

Two other editors worked in West Africa: Nigeria and Ghana. One man helped in the foundation of a retreat center and directed retreats there. On his way out to Africa he stopped off in Rome and worked to re-catalogue a very large library there. He likes to keep busy!

The other editor who was based in Nigeria was a professor of theology and

then an administrator charged with overseeing the expansion of Jesuit apostolates and the formation of young Jesuits. He was president of a secondary school when 60 of his students perished in a plane crash as they were going home for Christmas. The ability to cope with disaster is a special gift of missionaries, a gift that is tested all too often in places where the infrastructure is weak or nonexistent. Missionaries are mobile, too, so after this man's term of office ended, he moved to Kenya, once again to teach theology to young Jesuits.

All of these men have been shaped by their experiences. Their profound understanding of the human condition in all manner of different worlds has influenced their writing, and it has influenced the stay-at-home members as well. Not that there are really any true stay-at-home members: 10 of us studied abroad and our two scholastics have worked in Jamaica, Guyana, Mexico and China as part of their Jesuit formation.

Of Many Things

We are all "back home" now, but we try never to lose

sight of what has been heard and seen, and to share those things with our readers in this ever-shrinking world.

Dennis M. Linehan, S.J.

Editor's Note: Ave atque Vale

Attentive readers will notice that a new member has joined the **America** family. With our 11/24 issue, Barbara E. Reid, O.P., is the new author of the Word column, succeeding Daniel Harrington, S.J., who has completed the usual three-year cycle of commentary on the Sunday readings.

We are pleased to have a daughter of St. Dominic join our company. Sister Reid is known for the excellence of her scholarship, the clarity of her insight and the lightness of her prose. A recent reader survey indicated that 70 percent of our readers look to the column for personal inspiration. While we hope it will continue to help homilists, Sister Reid will strive to meet that need for spiritual insight.

The editors are grateful to Father Harrington for the quality of his commentaries the last three years. His fans will be pleased to know that he will continue to present Books on the Bible surveys in these pages, and that he is collecting his Word columns for a book to appear soon.

D.C.

America

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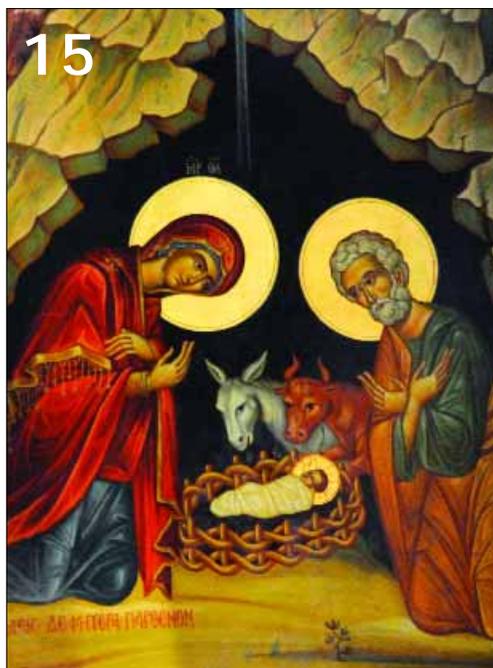
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Rejoice Always Barbara E. Reid



This week @
America Connects

A slideshow of icon images, and video meditations on Advent from the editors. Plus, on our podcast, Richard Leonard, S.J., reflects on the popularity of "The Dark Knight" and other fantasy films. All at americamagazine.org.

Still a Catholic Charity

Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska got some of her biggest (intentional) laughs of the presidential campaign during her acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, when she lambasted Senator Barack Obama's work as a community organizer. "I guess a small-town mayor is like a community organizer," she said, "except that you have actual responsibilities." It is hard to understand such mocking of those who help the poor organize in order to obtain justice and fair treatment.

The disdain spread into the Catholic world, making a target of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the church's leading organization for fighting poverty in this country. The campaign has provided \$7.3 million in grant money, spread out over 10 years, to local branches of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, known as Acorn. On its blog, the periodical *First Things* called C.C.H.D. "misbegotten in concept and corrupt in practice," argued for its abolition, charging that it supported "pro-abortion activities and politicians" and, for good measure, claimed that C.C.H.D. had dropped the word "Catholic" from its name.

Wrong on all counts. It remains the *Catholic* Campaign for Human Development; its grants are given to projects in accord with Catholic teaching; and it is a model of efficient management, providing an array of services for the poor. Sadly, that magazine's false accusations were echoed during the meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in November. Just as sad, the charges came before C.C.H.D.'s annual fundraising campaign.

Let's set the record straight: C.C.H.D. does the Gospel work of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and sheltering the homeless. (After charges of improprieties emerged about Acorn, C.C.H.D. stopped its grants to the group.) The importance of the kind of work done by C.C.H.D. was underlined repeatedly by another community organizer—not one from 1990s Chicago but another fellow, from first-century Palestine.

Missionaries in Peril

On Nov. 10 two religious sisters were kidnapped by armed men in northeastern Kenya, near the border with Somalia. The sisters are members of the Contemplative Missionary Movement of Charles de Foucauld. Sister Caterina Giraud, 67, and Sister Maria Teresa Oliviero, 61, have worked in Kenya since the early 1970s. It is presumed that they have been taken across the border into Somalia, and both church and civil authorities are trying to arrange

their release.

In northeast Congo, the devastating effects of a civil war are now multiplied by a severe food shortage and an outbreak of cholera. Despite these perils, representatives of the missionary congregations serving in the area have promised "to remain alongside the Congolese people, sharing the difficulties of this crisis." There are at least 10 different religious orders of both men and women serving in the region. There is high alarm also for foreign religious working in Zamboanga del Sur in the Philippines. The religious have been threatened by some armed gangs and groups affiliated with the local Al Qaeda cell.

The situation is the same in many other places where expatriate missionaries work. The example of those who work in North Kivu in the Congo is typical of these missionary men and women. They want to stay with their people. While they acknowledge the threats they face, they point out that their people live daily with even greater threats. They all deserve our prayers, encouragement and support.

A Heartbeat Away

There has not been a Catholic in the White House since John F. Kennedy, but on Inauguration Day, Joseph R. Biden, an Irish Catholic born in Scranton, Pa., will be sworn in as vice president, the first Catholic ever elected to the post.

Some have judged Senator Biden's commitment to Catholicism by his votes regarding abortion and have found it wanting. His record is mixed. Mr. Biden has described himself as "a practicing Catholic prepared to accept my church's view that life begins at conception." He has also said he would not support overturning *Roe v. Wade*. But the senator has opposed both federal funding for abortion and the practice of partial birth or late-term abortion. And he supported a \$100 million bill aimed to reduce teen pregnancies. As a senator, Biden voted to limit both the number of abortions and the reasons some women procure them.

But is even a legislator's entire voting record enough to judge his or her faith commitment? It does indicate one's values, but so do major life choices, habits of worship, service to others, civic involvement and quality of family life. In Mr. Biden's case, his faith also appears to have been reflected in the way he dealt with personal loss—the death of his first wife and infant daughter and his own brain aneurysm. His commitment to draw close to his sons as a single father for years and his choice not to enrich himself through his Senate seat also reflect the faith of the man soon to be a heartbeat away from the presidency.

Morgan Would Weep

A LITTLE MORE THAN 100 YEARS AGO, the financier J. Pierpont Morgan rushed back from a church convention in Richmond, Va., to organize the financial leaders of the day to stem the Panic of 1907. That financial crisis, with parallels to our own, spun out of control as the New York Stock Exchange lost 50 percent of its value, depositors withdrew their savings from banks, and liquidity contracted to a trickle. Morgan pledged large sums of his own money and convinced other financiers to join him in rescuing the economy and preparing the way for reforms that eventually established the Federal Reserve System, the U.S. central bank.

Secretary of the Treasury Henry M. Paulson, along with Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke, has orchestrated the government's efforts to meet the present financial crisis. But though banks and other financial institutions, like the insurance giant A.I.G., have benefitted from the government's bailout efforts, no leader in Morgan's mold has emerged from the private sector to provide leadership in the crisis. The one exception is the billionaire Warren Buffett, who made a \$3 billion investment in General Electric and then \$5 billion in Goldman Sachs to show his confidence in the economy.

Instead, until New York's Attorney General Andrew Cuomo brought pressure on Wall Street firms to disclose information on executive compensation and bonuses, the large banks and investment firms continued to protect high salaries for their executives and make plans for bonuses. Cuomo is telling executives to assume their responsibilities and reform their businesses and their lifestyles before he forces them to. Reform is the order of the day. The ratio of executive compensation to worker salaries in the United States is still the most exaggerated in the world, 344 to 1 in 2007. At one time, those at the top might have argued that the market dictated their excessive rewards; but the market, as we knew it, is no longer. Like it or not, what we have for now is state capitalism; and big bank executives, with some exceptions, are on the public dole.

It is difficult to find investment bankers or hedge fund managers who have not been tarnished by the Wall Street bust. Tainted executives are found both inside the Bush administration—suspected by some of “crony capitalism” for its lack of transparency in allocating the aid made available under the new Troubled Assets Relief Program—and inside president-elect Obama's transition team.

But if the financial sector as a whole has been maimed by the subprime loan problem, all will benefit from those who speak out about executive responsibilities: for the miscalculations that brought harm to so many (none has yet even said, “I am sorry”), for accountability in handling new government loans and investments and for suggestions on a redesign of the financial sector. Recovery demands more than emergency measures to keep the economy going. It requires the will to make reforms, as in 1907 and 1933, to prevent financial collapse from recurring and the vision to stimulate innovation without ever again letting the financial sector grow out of sync with the economy as a whole. Business does have the human capital to lead the way. People like Buffett and Jamie Dimon, the chairman of J. P. Morgan Chase who has thus far escaped the crisis with his reputation intact, are among those who have the intelligence, the knowledge and the powers of persuasion to guide the way.

TO REASSURE PUBLIC OPINION and foreign markets in the meantime, greater transparency and accountability are required on the part of both government and business. The Congress and the Treasury need to activate the oversight programs written into TARP. It would also be wise for the Federal Reserve to acknowledge publicly the \$2 trillion in loans it has quietly made to stabilize markets. The function of TARP was to restore liquidity and so sustain economic activity. Government buy-ins and loans ought to be conditioned on their proper use. For the recipients of government funds—though a few solid institutions were forced to accept them for the good of all—buying up other banks, paying dividends and executive bonuses are not compatible with that goal.

If low-performing financial institutions do not establish reasonable salary caps for executives, declare an embargo on bonuses and set improved capital standards for lending, procedures ought to be put in place to demand the return of government funds. If the financiers will not clean up their own houses, then government should act; and if government regulators are too cozy with those under regulation, then Congress and the public need to insist on responsibility. But the country and the economy will be better off if business leaders themselves, whether they are untainted or repentant, take responsibility for the past—and the future.

Actions at a Glance

Key actions taken by the U.S. bishops' conference at its fall general assembly

- Warned the new administration and new Congress that lifting existing federal abortion restrictions would alienate tens of millions of Americans and could be seen as an attack on religious freedom.
- Issued a statement on the economic crisis saying the church will continue to reach out to those in need.
- Approved another section of the English translation of the third edition of the Roman Missal.
- Overwhelmingly approved a liturgical service in English and Spanish for blessing children in the womb.
- Approved a \$144 million budget and a list of plans and programs for 2009.
- Set goals on priority issues ranging from strengthening marriage to cultural diversity in the church.
- Chose the Revised Grail Psalter from Conception Abbey over the Revised New American Bible translation of the Book of Psalms for liturgical use.
- Elected Bishop George V. Murry of Youngstown, Ohio, as USCCB secretary-elect and chose chairmen-elect for five USCCB committees.

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The annual fall meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops took place in Baltimore, Md., Nov. 10 to 13. The bishops meet twice annually, in the fall and spring.

Easier to Obtain Weapons Than Food?

The current lack of global arms regulations makes it easier to obtain weapons "than food, shelter and education," said Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Vatican's observer to the United Nations. Illicit arms trade has turned tensions into armed conflicts and has compromised peace and development, he said.

The archbishop said the Holy See "shares the grave concern of conflict-ridden countries" where illicit arms trade and production hinder the peace-

ful settlement of disputes and prolong conflicts."

In his address to the U.N. Security Council on Nov. 19, the archbishop praised the U.N. General Assembly for adopting a resolution that spells out initial steps that need to be taken toward regulating the trade and transfer of arms. He said the General Assembly's discussion of this issue was both timely and vital and was also something the Holy See "fully supports and encourages."

More Efforts Needed for Children With AIDS



Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga

Anticipating the observance of World AIDS Day on Dec. 1, the president of Caritas Internationalis urged greater efforts from governments and from medical experts in caring

for children with H.I.V., the virus that causes AIDS. Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, president of the international organization of national Catholic charities, said that while a third of H.I.V.-positive adults in the world have access to antiretroviral drugs so they can live longer and better lives, "only 15 percent of children living with H.I.V. get these essential drugs. Many die before their second birthday." He said, "Pharmaceutical companies and governments must show leadership by developing child-friendly medicine for H.I.V. and improving testing." Cardinal Rodríguez said children will be the key focus of the 162 Caritas member organizations in 2009.

'Lack of Humanity' Triggered Economic Crisis

"To speak of the global need for dialogue, peace and simple human kindness when the world economy is in crisis may seem ridiculous, but a lack of humanity and solidarity are what triggered the crisis in the first place," said the founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio. Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Rome-based lay movement, spoke on Nov. 18 at the closing ceremony of the annual interreligious gathering for peace organized by Sant'Egidio. "Today, in the midst of a global crisis of great proportions, one for which all the consequences cannot be seen, we feel a need to affirm that the economy and finance are not everything," Riccardi said. "Too much has been overlooked: all that regards the

Signs of the Times

human person and the spirit,” he said. “In order to build a world of well-being for a few, we have given growth to a world of pain for many.” Hundreds of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh and other religious leaders gathered from Nov. 16 to 18 in Nicosia, Cyprus, to promote interreligious dialogue, the peaceful resolution of conflicts and joint action to alleviate poverty and human suffering.

Goals of Peace Pastoral Remain Unfulfilled

May 3 was the 25th anniversary of *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter. In contrast to the highly public process that led to its adoption, the document's anniversary passed with hardly any notice. But that does not mean the bishops' core messages—challenging the world's nuclear powers to rid their arsenals of nuclear weapons and discussing the importance of peacemaking in everyone's life—have been lost, according to

some of the country's leading peace advocates. “It's a different time. It's a different world. But the principles are timeless,” John Carr, executive director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told Catholic News Service. “What the bishops said, what the church continues to say, is more important than ever,” Carr added. “I think the church these days is more involved in questions of international affairs and in questions of war and peace than back then.”

Mother Teresa 'Still Has Lessons for World'

More than 10 years after her death, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta still has lessons to teach the world, according to the priest who co-founded the Missionaries of Charity Fathers with her and has written a new book about her. The Rev. Joseph Langford, a 57-year-old native of Toledo, Ohio, said he wrote *Mother Teresa's Secret Fire* (Our Sunday

Visitor, \$19.95) to try to explain “what made Mother Teresa Mother Teresa” and how she sustained hope, joy and a belief in the possibility of change in the face of inner and external challenges. “As America faces its own dark night of the soul,” he said, Mother Teresa shows Americans and the rest of the world “how to live joyfully, creatively, in a way that leaves a legacy.”

Nobel Winner Meets Workers From Iowa Raid



A 13-year-old boy, Pedro cries as he talks to about 300 people gathered Nov. 8 at St. Bridget Catholic Church in Postville, Iowa, for his testimony about a May 12 immigration raid.

Palestinians Struggle to Attend Catholic Schools



Palestinian girls take a lunch break at the girls school run by the Sisters of St. Joseph in Bethlehem, West Bank, Oct. 23.

For six months last year, Adel Handal was unable to pay his phone bill, and the electricity has been cut off more times than he cares to remember because he did not pay. But while Handal, 44, a Palestinian hairdresser, and his wife cut corners to maintain their household, they have never considered taking their four children out of Catholic schools. “They have been going to these schools since kindergarten,

and we prefer them to stay there. It is better for them to be in a Christian environment. We will do whatever it takes to keep them there,” said Handal, who pays about \$1,500 per year for all his children to attend the girls schools run by the Rosary Sisters and the De La Salle Holy Land school for boys. Tuition does not include the yearly \$120-per-child registration fee or incidentals such as uniforms, books and daily transportation. For Handal, whose income barely reaches \$400 a month, the monthly payments he must make constitute almost 25 percent of the family income. The Handals try to cut costs in small ways, like packing lunches instead of buying them.

Rigoberta Menchú came from Guatemala to Postville, Iowa, for one purpose. “I have come to listen specifically to the testimonies of the people who have suffered abuses here from the raid,” she said. “I come not only to listen to your suffering, but also to identify with your suffering. Your pain is my pain.” So began the message of the 1992 Nobel Peace laureate. About 300 people gathered in St. Bridget Church on Nov. 8 to hear her message, to pray together and to hear the testimony of people who had been detained following the morning raid last May at the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The majority of the immigrants were from Guatemala. In the raid 389 employees were arrested and detained. Most of those arrested were charged with felonies relating to the use of false personal identity documents. They accepted plea agreements calling for five-month sentences before they were to be deported.

From CNS and other sources. CNS photos.



Woman and Child

‘Often the simplest interventions can work miracles.’

ALL BABIES ARE MIRACLES, some more than others. The Advent and Christmas Scripture readings bring this home to us, with tales of unexpected babies being delivered against all odds. These themes resonate in a special way this Christmas season, as I hold our newborn girl. She was an unexpected blessing and a difficult pregnancy, full of dire doctors’ warnings about potentially grave health problems for us both. We beat the odds, with access to excellent health care and insurance to cover the costs.

Many women and children are not beating the odds. Every minute somewhere in the world a woman dies in childbirth. Another 10 to 20 million women each year suffer severe injury, infection and disease as a consequence of childbirth. Conditions like pre-eclampsia (pregnancy-induced high blood pressure that causes the mother’s organs to shut down), gestational diabetes, anemia and pre-term labor are manageable health conditions for women with access to modern care. But for millions of others these remain killers. Hemorrhage, infection, high blood pressure, obstructed labor and crude abortions cause 70 percent of all maternal deaths, according to the World Health Organization, but “unavailable, inaccessible, unaffordable, or poor quality care is fundamentally responsible.” These death rates have not changed over the past 20 years. Experts believe the problem is actually worse than this, because death rates are underreported. Poor women do not count, even in death.

Eight years ago, many people hoped these dismal statistics would change as the world pledged to improve maternal

health. The largest-ever gathering of heads of state marked the new millennium by adopting eight Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015. One hundred eighty-nine countries pledged to reduce maternal mortality by three quarters between 1990 and 2015 and to achieve universal coverage with skilled care at birth by 2015.

The goal is still distant, halfway to the target year. As U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon notes: “Maternal health stands as the slowest-moving target of all the M.D.G.s. US \$10 billion would ensure coverage of basic services for maternal, newborn and children’s health. More investment for training community health workers would be a strong step towards strengthening health systems.” In recent years, governments and nongovernmental aid groups increased attention and funding for HIV/AIDS and malaria relief in developing countries. But this investment has not been forthcoming for maternal health.

The United States has the highest maternal mortality rate of all industrialized countries except Latvia. In Ireland only one woman in 48,000 dies in childbirth. The rate is more than 10 times higher here in the United States, which was ranked 41st out of 171 countries in maternal death. The death rate is even worse for African-American women in the United States, who are four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women. Catholic Relief Services is working hard in Sierra Leone, where the problem is worse. One out of eight women there die in childbirth.

This is not like beating cancer, where cures are lacking and treatments extremely expensive. We know what to do to save mothers, and often the simplest interventions work miracles. A World Health Organization maternal health kit in Rwanda consists of a clean razor blade and string to cut and tie off the umbilical cord, and a

clean cloth to absorb the bleeding. These simple objects drastically improve a Rwandan mother’s chances of surviving childbirth. We have the technology, and the cost is low. The problem is that women’s lives are not valued in many places. Betsy McCallon of the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood notes, “There is not that sense of demand that this is unacceptable, so it continues to happen.”

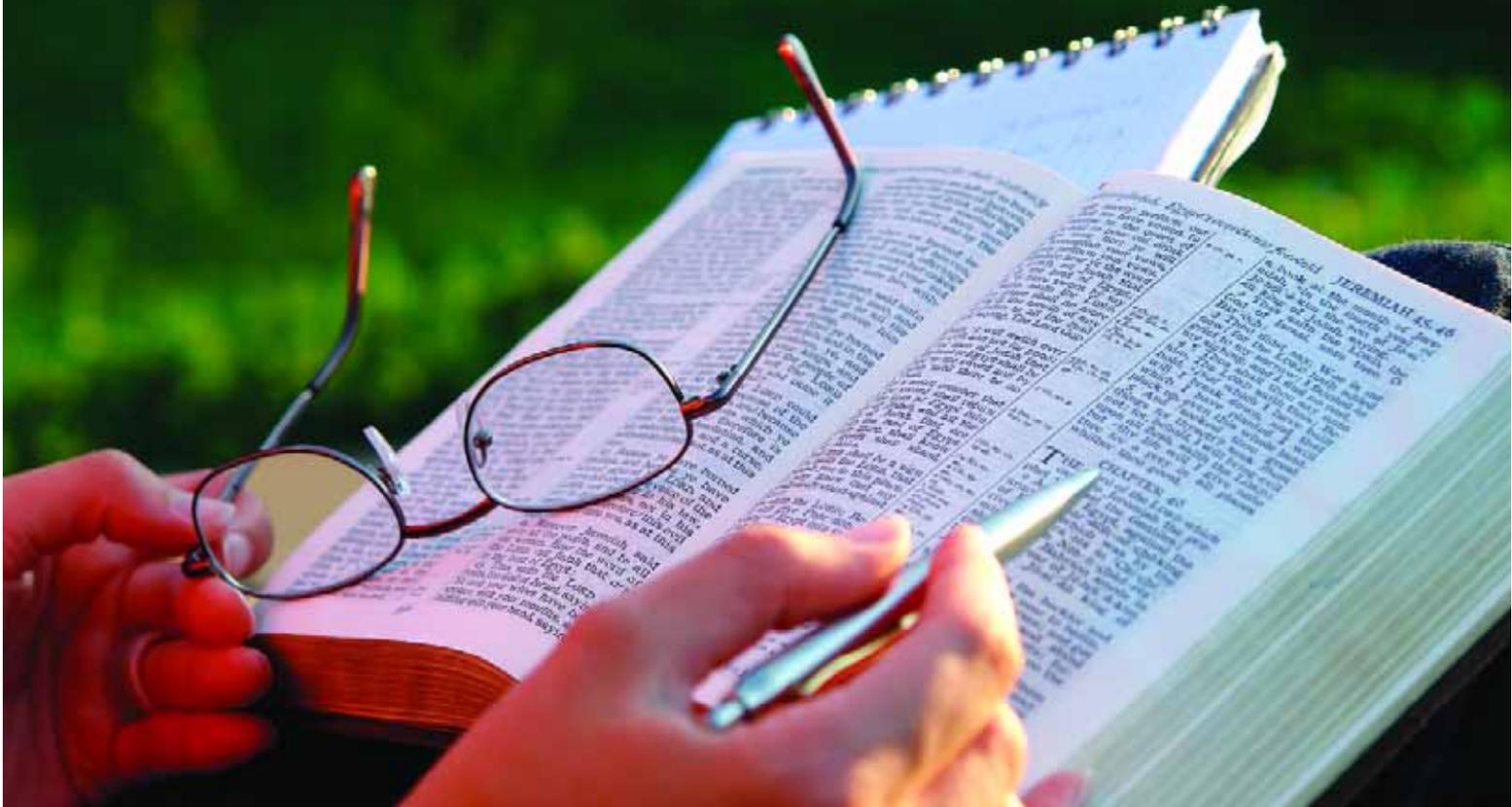
Sarah Brown, the wife of the British prime minister, argues that maternal mortality “shames us all. With sufficient political will, we can live in a world where women do not have to fear for their own lives at the moment when they are giving life to others.” Norway’s Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg concurs, citing the ready money available for bailing out banks: “Money doesn’t seem to be a problem when the problem is money...but funds for investment in people are so short in supply.” Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund agrees that “this is not a financial problem; this is a priorities problem.”

Saving mothers benefits all of society. According to the W.H.O.: “Motherless children die more frequently, are more at risk of becoming malnourished and less likely to enroll in school.... Public funding for maternal and child health care is justified on grounds of equity. Motherhood and childhood are periods of particularly high vulnerability because women and children are more likely to be poor. Women are more likely to be unemployed, to have lower wages, less access to education and resources, and more restricted decision-making power, all of which limits their access to care. Public investment in maternal and child health is justified in order to correct these inequities.”

Now is an opportune time to help shape the priorities of the new administration and Congress, and encourage them to keep their promises of improving health care here and abroad. Mary said yes to life, knowing the dangers. But we spend more on Madonna and child Christmas cards and stamps than we do on today’s women and children at risk. As we celebrate our Savior’s birth in poverty, let our actions match our reverence for the Madonna and child, welcoming life against all odds.

Maryann Cusimano Love

MARYANN CUSIMANO LOVE, professor of international relations at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., is the author of *You Are My Miracle*.



The state of Catholic Bible study today

A Literate Church

— BY DAVID GIBSON —

FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS, the Rev. Roger V. Karban of the Diocese of Belleville has loved the Scriptures, studying them deeply, preaching on them weekly and teaching about them in popular Bible study groups. So galvanized was Father Karban by the Second Vatican Council's encouragement of Scripture study that he even started assigning Bible readings as penances, a practice he continues to this day. Yet for all of that hard work and the efforts by the wider church—continuing with the recent Synod of Bishops on the Word of God (Oct. 5-26)—Father Karban can still come across to Catholics like the fellow in the confessional who balked when Father Karban tried to hand out his usual Scripture-based penance.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK/SORIN POPA

DAVID GIBSON is a freelance religion journalist and author of *The Coming Catholic Church* and *The Rule of Benedict*.

“Father,” the man complained, “I used to be a Protestant, and I became a Catholic so I wouldn’t have to read that book!”

Alas, while much has changed since Vatican II, some traditions die hard. Chief among them appears to be the old saw that Catholics “don’t read the Bible”—a hoary Reformation-era aphorism, but one that too many Catholics themselves still accept. “I find a lot of people who are still brainwashed that Scripture is for Protestants—that we Catholics don’t need that at all,” Karban says.

Then again, Catholics can take some solace in two developments, one less praiseworthy than the other.

Biblical Illiteracy

On the downside, surveys show that Catholics are hardly alone in their struggle for biblical literacy. While American Christians proudly cite the Bible as their favorite book (93 percent own one, usually the King James version) and two-thirds see it as the source for answers to “all or most of life’s basic questions,” they actually do not know or understand much of what is written between the covers.

Only half of U.S. adults, for example, could name a single Gospel, and most do not know the name of the first book of the Bible. Even those *sola scriptura* Protestants who intimidate Catholics with chapter-and-verse recitations are not doing too well. According to a survey conducted in 2000, 60 percent of evangelicals said Jesus was born in Jerusalem, not that “little town of Bethlehem.” And despite all our bitter battles over posting the Ten Commandments, six in 10 Americans cannot name five of them, while half of high school seniors think Sodom and Gomorrah were married. When a USA Today article on Stephen Prothero’s 2007 book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t*, was titled, “Americans Get an ‘F’ in Religion,” the eminent historian of religion, Martin E. Marty, quipped that the newspaper could be guilty of grade inflation.

Moreover, while fewer believers know much about the Bible, one-third of Americans continue to believe that it is literally true, something organizers of the Synod on the Word of God called a dangerous form of fundamentalism that is “winning more and more adherents...even among Catholics.” Such literalism, the synod’s preparatory document said, “demands an unshakable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research.”

Positive Trends in Bible Study

Pointing to the deficiencies of other Christians is not a comfort to Catholic leaders or even a respectable defense in backyard arguments with Protestant neighbors. But on the positive side, Catholics can also point to several

promising initiatives and trends.

One is the growing number of reliable and readable books that can provide an introduction to Scripture study and a counter-current in the sea of speculative material available. Works ranging from the widely praised book *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?* by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., to Garry Wills’s series of primers (including *What the Gospels Meant* and *What Paul Meant*) to the recent *Jesus of Nazareth*, by Pope Benedict XVI, are just a few examples. Several educators have recommended the introduction to *Jesus of Nazareth* as a solid starting point for Scripture study. Scholars like PHEME PERKINS (her *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction* remains a standard text) and Dianne Bergant, C.S.A. (*People of the Covenant: An Invitation to the Old Testament*, for example) bring both a woman’s perspective and deep research.

Moreover, the Internet is a portal to vast amounts of quality material, including lectures by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., one of the most respected and accessible Bible scholars of the past generation.

Yet the heart of good Bible study—defined as close reading that leads to a deeper and more mature spirituality—is the small group, and in that field the Little Rock Scripture Study series remains the leader. The Little Rock series began in 1974 as a modest program for Catholics in central Arkansas as a way, as the co-founder Abbot Jerome Kodell, O.S.B., put it, to help reawaken biblical studies and spirituality in the Catholic Church, “which had been subdued and muted for four hundred years as a result of polemics of the Reformation period.” In fact, equipping the relatively small Catholic community to interact better with the region’s dominant Bible-quoting Protestants was another spur to founding the program.

The response was overwhelming, and a decade later the program had gone national. Today, according to L.R.S.S. director Cackie Upchurch, the program has been used in more than 7,000 parishes in every U.S. diocese and in 55 countries around the world. Ms. Upchurch said there has been an encouraging spike in interest in their programs recently, owing to news of the pope’s book on Jesus along with an unexpectedly strong interest in the ongoing Pauline Year. The Synod on the Word of God may help, too, she added. The growing number of lay ministers is also key in developing programs like Bible study that appeal to parishioners. “Bible study should be at the center of what we do in our parishes,” Ms. Upchurch said.

Paradoxically, the scandal of sexual abuse by members of the Catholic clergy may also have prompted some Catholics to explore the Bible in depth for the first time in their lives, because the crisis revealed not only tragic sins by the clergy, but also a lack of basic religious education among an American laity that thought it should know better. Since

2004, Voice of the Faithful, the lay reform group that sprang up in response to the scandal, has posted resources for Bible study on its Web site, including a guide for a seven-session study of the early church. The goal is not one-stop scholarship, but a first step on the path to developing small groups, said Donna B. Doucette, executive director of V.O.T.F.: “If your ambition is to increase the voice and responsibility of the laity, then your responsibility is to understand the church you are trying to reform. We never approached our religion as something we needed to study.

We approached it as something we needed to experience.”

Doucette said there has been “no great stampede” for the V.O.T.F. package, “but those who find it, like it.”

Some wonder whether, like Catholic social teaching, Scripture scholarship is becoming one of the church’s best-kept secrets. There is a good argument to be made that modern biblical scholarship, begun as a Protestant enterprise, has in the last half-century seen Catholic thinkers emerge as the most respected and readable Scripture scholars. Catholics who discover this trove respond enthusiastically. Father Karban recalled that he began his first parish Bible study in 1966 as a class on the coming reforms in liturgy; but as often happens, once participants started talking about the biblical roots of the Mass, no one wanted to stop. The liturgy class never started, but Father Karban still leads three Bible classes a week at a parish, a hospital and a high school—some 30 people on Sunday nights, several dozen regulars on Tuesday mornings and another 15 to 20 on Thursday evenings. He also teaches a popular weekly class at a local community college.

Barriers to the Bible

Given such obvious interest, what are the obstacles to a more biblically literate church? Lack of public awareness about good programs and their limited availability at the parish level are two. Another is the time crunch and multiplying distractions that impinge on every aspect of life. For example, Charles McMahon, a retired professor of physics at the University of Pennsylvania, says he has been engrossed in Bible study since he retired in 2001, learning largely through lectures by Father Brown on compact disc. But three years ago, when Mr. McMahon tried to organize a Bible study at the twinned parishes he attends in Philadelphia, just six people showed up, and only three or four—out of hundreds of families on the parish rolls—made it through the seven-week course. “Finding time to sit down

and do serious reading is just too difficult,” Mr. McMahon said. “If this is going to be done, we’re going to have to teach kids in high school and college. The level of knowledge about the New Testament, the Old Testament and church history is about a millimeter deep. We’re incredibly ignorant—myself, everyone.”

That lack of expertise can also constrain those able to devote time to Bible study. Ironically, as the church has emphasized Bible study, many Catholics hate to admit that they have been attending church all their lives but do not

Biblical scholarship has seen Catholic thinkers emerge as the most respected and readable Scripture scholars.

know much about the Scriptures. Then when they do open the Bible, they often treat it like any other book, and start at the beginning, rather than with, say, the Gospels. Few get beyond the story of the flood early in the Book of Genesis and the tide of “begats” that follows. “When I was growing up as a Catholic we were really told not to read the Bible because we could not under-

stand it, and that it was too complex for us to understand,” Ms. Upchurch said. “And while it’s true that there is a lot of complexity, the same human dimensions are always there. And we have tools to help us bridge the gap between the 21st century and the second century.”

The flip side of this embarrassment is the presumption among many Catholics that they “get” the Bible at Mass, along with everything else they need for their spiritual lives. The postconciliar revolution in liturgy greatly expanded the readings, with a three-year cycle in the vernacular that for the first time included Old Testament passages. Given that exposure, many think they do not need anything else. As Mr. McMahon put it, “The majority still say you go to Mass, you get your ticket punched, and that’s it for the week.”

Certainly, the Mass could be a more effective starting place for Bible study, and Father Karban and others in formation work echo the concern expressed at the Vatican synod that priests need to learn Scripture better so that they can deliver better, more “biblical” homilies. Father Karban cited a recent survey that found seminarians are actually getting less Scripture today than in the 1930s, when modern biblical study was just emerging. Indeed, Father Karban says some of his most devoted students are themselves priests who want to learn more. Many laypeople would likely second Father Karban’s point. “How many times do I need to hear about the mustard seed? I got it. It fell on fallow ground,” Fox television host Bill O’Reilly complains in his essay in a new collection of interviews by Kerry Kennedy, *Being Catholic Now*. “But every year I’ve got to listen to the



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guy tell me about the mustard seed. My 3-year-old's got it. Okay, take it, apply it to what we're doing, how we're living."

On the other hand, better homilies would still be a beginning, not the end of the journey. Deeper study provides the necessary context, and study groups should be led by a good facilitator who uses quality materials. Experts agree that a poorly led Bible study can be worse than none at all—a scavenger hunt for proof texts to support belief or win arguments rather than a search for faith and wisdom.

The Living Word of God

A final paradox is that the prospect of studying the Bible can induce anxiety among both lay believers and the hierarchy over where such exploration could lead. Studying the Bible can raise questions about church history and the tenets of faith. And too many leaders of study groups hesitate to engage or encourage such questions, because they fear either they do not have the answers or they will not be believed. Father Karban says that while he has never in 40 years known anyone whose beliefs have been undermined by Bible study, he still encounters those who think "that I'm going to come up with something that's going to destroy their faith."

Bible study may unsettle and even provoke. In a sense, the Bible is a dangerous book that grows more challenging with each reading. As Mark Twain said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

Cackie Upchurch likes that quotation. The Bible is a source of comfort, yes, and it should give us courage. But, she added: "It should also disturb us. It should also stir us into action. And if it's not doing those things, and if it's just in our heads, then I do not think we're doing justice to the living Word of God.... If you read this stuff and really believe it, you might have to change how you live." 

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Gateways to Prayer

The enduring spiritual power of icons

BY STEPHEN BONIAN

ICONS HAVE BEEN OBJECTS OF FAITH, controversy and fascination for centuries. The popularity of icons, which are a rich resource for prayer, continues to this day as such artists as the Rev. William Hart McNichols and Robert Lentz, O.F.M., practice the art of modern iconography.

Praying with icons is an intuitive art gained with practice and experience. Henri Nouwen provides an enlightening introduction to the practice in his book *Praying With Icons*. Nouwen recounts the weeks he spent “gazing” at four Russian images and reflecting on select passages from Scripture. Christians interested in making use of icons in prayer can imitate Nouwen’s method, but they need not do so. There is a freedom of engagement in the contemplation of art that varies from person to person and with time and place. Still, as one embarks on this journey of prayer, it is useful to keep in mind a few guiding principles and to reflect on the history of this holy art form.

An Incarnational Art Form

The Christian mysteries reflected in iconography are pri-

STEPHEN BONIAN, S.J., a Jesuit priest of the Eastern tradition, is based at the Jesuit Center in Amman, Jordan and ministers to the Eastern churches in the Near East.



marily the Incarnation and the Redemption. The primary power of icons lies in their physicality: they make the presence of the holy tangible. They rouse the imagination and generate emotions in the viewer.

Especially noteworthy among all icons are those of the Blessed Mother. Holding the infant Jesus in her arms, she radiates the light of Christ. Gazing upon her, the viewer is moved by her gestures, especially the movement of her hands and eyes. Like a mirror vessel, she reflects a profound mystery: that we too hold God within us and can touch the divine with our hands. Though the child may often be asleep in our earthen vessels, he is nevertheless a sign of the peace of the Father dwelling within us.

Two types of icons are most reflective of Mary’s mystery: in the first, she is depicted holding the grown-up child Jesus in her arms; in the second, she gives praise with open arms as the child dwells in that perfect circle of her womb. In both representations Mary symbolizes the altar and the throne upon which and through which Christ is being fully transfigured to our world.

One is impressed by how often in the painting (or the writing, as it is called) of these icons, Mary appears larger than Jesus. Clearly the icon painter intends to show her great value before God. In such icons the emphasis is not so much on Mary’s humility, but rather on her enormity as the mother of God. The icons of the annunciation to



Painting the Life of Jesus

Many icons dramatize the life of Jesus. The traditional icons of the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan often show him sanctifying the river as he is immersed in it. The symbols of the Father and the Spirit are above him, while below he is flanked by the heavenly world of the angels on one side and by his human friends and followers on the other.

The Gospel accounts of the parables of Jesus are also filled with colorful and dynamic images. Gazing at icons of these parables can enliven the imagination, helping to flesh out what may be hidden behind the words of Scripture. The icons depicting the prodigal son and his loving father, for example, express in a gesture of embrace the longing of the two for each other, and of God's very longing to embrace us as well—perhaps even at that same moment of contemplation.

The miracles of Jesus, either of nature or healing, are also presented as dynamic events. Combined with Scripture passages, they can inspire us to contemplate the hidden powers of God. Consider the icon of the tempest on the lake: while Jesus sleeps in the boat, his disciples

Mary by the Angel Gabriel vary in their depiction of the scene, though usually they emphasize the spiritual nature of the visit, with a special emphasis on Mary's discerning posture. Likewise the icons that represent the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth depict a holy kiss and a welcoming hug between the two joyful mothers. They seek to depict what Luke suggests in his Gospel account of these events, though more is left to the imagination.

The icons of the nativity of the Lord reflect moments of excitement, wonder and peace at the birth of the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem, expressed in narrative form in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. (Since Luke emphasizes Mary's role in the incarnation, he is often described as the first to have painted the icon of Mary—with words, of course, not paint.)

are pictured as fearful and anxious. This moment may call to mind various times of fear and anxiety in our lives, as we try to awaken the powers of Jesus dormant inside us. Another moving miracle often depicted in icons is the miracle at Cana, where the water turns to wine as it is poured into large jars. Here we witness Jesus' special relationship with his mother and the generosity he offers to the wedding couple.

Jesus' healing miracles also served to inspire many icon artists. The posture of women at miracles—whether it is the hemorrhaging woman holding fast to Jesus' garment, or Martha and Mary at the raising of Lazarus—stresses the human agony of separation as well as the human desire for healing and God's compassionate response to our needs.

DETAIL OF "JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL." PHOTO: ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE

A Rich Resource

Icons can be used in individual prayer or during retreats. They are especially suited to Ignatian forms of prayer, which by their nature seek to use the imagination to open doorways to mystical and spiritual realities. With time and careful attention, icons can reveal several layers of meaning. To make the best use of them, it is important to have a variety of images to choose from. As we have seen, it is natural to pair certain icons with specific scriptural passages. Other icons work well in conjunction with particular prayers. Images of Jesus and Mary, for example, can enhance the dialogue prayers in the Spiritual Exercises known as colloquies.

Here are a few other things to consider as you begin your prayer:

1. The choice of an icon should be based in part on the graces being asked for. If one seeks relief from anxiety, for example, the story of the calming of the storm (mentioned above) may be a good choice.

2. During prayer, one is likely to encounter moments of self-understanding, passion, zeal or conflict. Pay attention to these emotions, and what you were praying for when you experienced them. It is not uncommon for the image being gazed upon to change in affect as one continues to pray before it and through it.

3. After you finish your prayer, a reflective review can help to record the movements of the heart and of the Holy Spirit. Private reflection can be followed later by a conversation with a spiritual guide for guidance and discernment.

Praying with icons can help enrich our own spiritual lives, but the images can also help us to pray for family and friends, and even for an end to the maladies that plague our world. For example:

- Icons depicting God's love can be projected on loved ones, perhaps through the aid of a photograph. It is a way of putting on the love of Christ, to wrap our loved ones in the care of the heavenly mother and father. One might use an icon on the theme of Mary as Mother of Tenderness, which shows Mary and the child Jesus locked in a warm embrace.

- Icons expressing God's love for humanity can be used to pray for an end to war or relief from hunger and poverty. Icons of Christ's passion can be relevant here, as well as the genre known as Fountain of Healing, which pictures Mary and Jesus sitting atop a fountain of live-giving water.

- Icons of God's love can also be paired with images representing God's natural creation. By doing so one can achieve a sense of solidarity with God's world.

By using icons in prayer, we can transform our view of ourselves and of the natural world. Icons awaken us to a renewed reality—that we are living in a spirit-filled world, touched by the hidden redemptive powers of God's love



through Christ. Our attitude toward the earth itself can become a matter of relating to a world redeemed. Likewise, we can no longer objectify our human brothers and sisters, for all people being redeemed by God's graces now reflect and radiate the loving traces of the beloved son's light.

In his treatise *On Holy Images*, St. John Damascene offers the important insight that God chose to become matter so that we can see, touch and be present with him through our material world. "When the Invisible One becomes visible to flesh," he wrote, "you may then draw a likeness of his form." All Christians are indebted to the icon artists, both past and present, who have heeded this call. **A**



View more images of icons, at americamagazine.org/slideshows.

The Quiet Carpenter

What can St. Joseph teach us?

BY ROBERT P. MALONEY

A FEW YEARS AGO my sister visited me in Rome. As we toured the little chapel in the house where I lived, she asked me, “Where’s Joseph?” I was taken aback; there was no trace of the saint in the chapel at all. Later I showed her a small stone statue of Joseph in the yard behind the house (set up by one of the brothers named Joseph), which always had a candle burning before it. She was not very satisfied.

Joseph receives little attention these days, even in Advent. But if we read the infancy narratives carefully, we find that Joseph stands with Mary at center stage. In fact,

whereas Mary is the heroine in Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth and childhood, in Matthew’s account Joseph has the primary role. During Advent, the church encourages us to reflect on this great man, who accompanied Mary through life. What can Joseph’s life teach believers?

Folk Tales About Joseph

Most of what we commonly say about Joseph comes from apocryphal literature, early Christian writings that were not accepted into the New Testament canon. In these stories, popular imagination fills the vacuum left by the Gospels’ lack of historical detail about Joseph with delightful tales. There is Joseph the old man, for instance. In paintings, nativity scenes and Christmas plays, St. Joseph is usually portrayed as quite old, a grandfatherly figure in the stable at Bethlehem, or an elderly man with a flowering staff or, in deathbed scenes, a grey-haired patriarch whom Jesus and a

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“REST ON THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT,” MICHELANGELO MERISI DA CARAVAGGIO PHOTO: ALINARI/ART RESOURCE/NY

young Mary stand by and console.

Yet the Scriptures offer no evidence of Joseph's advanced age, and they give no details whatsoever about the time or place of his birth or death. Instead, these ideas come from *The Protoevangelium of James*, one of the most influential of the apocrypha. Written around the middle of the second century, *The Protoevangelium* attempted to reconcile Mary's virginity with scriptural references to Jesus' "brothers." As explanation, the writing imagines Joseph as an old widower with children who was appointed to be the 12-year-old Mary's guardian, after a dove flew from his staff and hovered over his head in the presence of the high priest.

Nowhere has the popular imagination about Joseph flourished more than in stories about the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. Coptic legends have Joseph sailing hundreds of miles down the Nile, fleeing with his family. Other stories tell of miracles that made the journey easier: palm trees bowed down to feed the family with their fruit; lions and leopards, instead of attacking them, wagged their tails in homage to Jesus. At Hermopolis, 175 miles south of Cairo, the idols of the pagan temple fell down as Joseph led the family through. Fifty miles farther south, near Kuskam—where Joseph and the family are said to have stayed six months—two robbers accosted them, but one, upon seeing Mary's tears, repented. According to the legend, these were the robbers later crucified with Jesus; the one who repented was the "good thief."

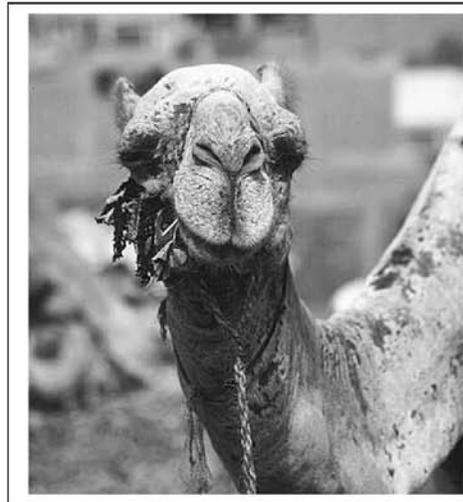
Art has illustrated these legends. Caravaggio's "Rest on the Flight into Egypt" depicts Joseph holding the music as a gorgeous angel plays the violin, lulling Mary and Jesus to sleep. Filippo Lippi, Bartolomeo Murillo and Georges de la Tour painted similar scenes.

The *Syriac-Arabic Infancy Gospel* and other apocrypha add further embellishments to the story of Joseph's life. Joseph the carpenter makes plows, yokes and other tools for farmers, as well as wooden beds

for homes. At age 40 he marries Melcha (some stories call her Escha), and during their 49 years of marriage they have four sons and two daughters. Joseph encounters Mary after he has been widowed for one year. The annunciation takes place two years later. Joseph, it is written, is out searching for a midwife when Jesus is born.

A final apocryphal work worth noting is the fourth-century *Story of Joseph the Carpenter*. This tale imagines Jesus working side by side with Joseph in the carpenter's shop and later treats Joseph's last days. Strong and alert until the age of 111, Joseph falls ill and confesses his sins on his deathbed,

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where he is consoled by Jesus and Mary. Jesus then beckons the archangels Michael and Gabriel to take Joseph's soul.

The Historical Joseph

The early church rejected these texts, even though they have some value as literary expressions of the popular religious imagination. Today we too recognize that many of these apocryphal stories are much too fantastic to be regarded as historical.

Given the scarcity of relevant historical detail in the New Testament, we are left with only a general outline about Joseph. It can be argued that he was of the lineage of David, at least in a broad sense. There is evidence that he came from either Bethlehem or Nazareth. He labored as a woodworker, a trade in which Jesus followed him. His language was a Palestinian dialect of Aramaic, though he probably knew enough Greek to bargain and write receipts in his trade. Most likely he also understood some Hebrew, which he heard read aloud in the synagogue.

According to the New Testament, Joseph became legally betrothed to Mary, probably when she was very young, which was the custom at the time. He then married her, in spite of her mysterious pregnancy, and became Jesus' legal father. He was just, upright and devoted to the Law, but compassionate in its interpretation. He accompanied Mary during the events surrounding the birth of

Jesus and into the early years of Jesus' life. He settled the family in Nazareth. With Mary, he would have tended to Jesus' religious education. By the time of Jesus' public ministry, however, Joseph had disappeared completely. Apparently he had died by this time, though we have no details about his death.

A Subject for Meditation

Year after year the church presents Joseph as a subject for meditation, especially during Advent. Three facets of the New Testament picture of Joseph merit our attention.

First, a central Gospel theme: Joseph, like Mary, listened to the word of God and acted on it. In the Gospels Joseph never speaks. But in Matthew, God speaks to Joseph at four critical moments in the history of Jesus, and in each instance, Joseph immediately responds. When the angel tells Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, Joseph receives her into his home. Upon being told he should take Jesus and his mother and flee to Egypt, Joseph leaves that very night. So, too, he later returns to Israel upon the direction of the angel. And when Joseph is warned in a dream not to go to Judea, he immediately changes course and settles the family in Galilee. His persistently faithful response to God's commands parallels the presentation of Mary in the Gospel of Luke. Both know how to "listen to the word of God and act upon it."



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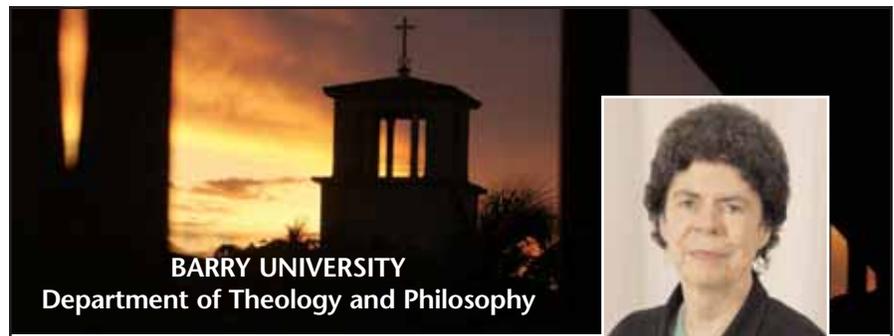
Second, in Matthew's Gospel Joseph is brought before the transcendent mystery of God again and again, sometimes with hesitation but always with alertness, and he faces it with faith. Surely Joseph cannot fathom the virginal conception of Jesus. But from the darkness of his own limited understanding, he responds to the mystery of God with awe and acceptance, tempering his strict observance of the Law with loving compassion and bowing in reverence to God's incomprehensible ways. He cannot possibly understand how this child, who seems like any other, could be "God with us," but in faith Joseph abandons himself to the task of loving the child and educating him.

Third, Joseph's life was steeped in daily dealings with the world around him; he was not set apart. Indeed, the life of the Holy Family at Nazareth was far from the idyllic monastery-like existence we sometimes imagine. Joseph was a woodworker, a neighborhood craftsman who made furniture and carved other objects, and spent time apprenticing his son in the same trade. Like many believers over the course of history, Joseph walked with God as a family man, laboring in his shop and living at home with Mary and Jesus. He combined prayer, hard work and the responsibilities of being a husband and father.

This year especially, after the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God, the church urges us to renew our love for the word of God. For Joseph, as for Mary his wife, heeding the word of God was paramount. His example challenges us to ask ourselves: Is the word of God really central for us, as it was for him? Is it water that gives us life when our hearts and minds are dry (Isaiah)? Is it a hammer to knock us loose when we are too set to budge (Jeremiah)? Is it food sweeter than honey for those times when life tastes bitter (Psalms)? Is it a two-edged sword, which when applied to others cuts us, too (Hebrews)?

Advent is upon us. Imagine how Joseph felt as the birth of his mysterious

son approached: puzzled, excited, awed. Yet in his puzzlement, the word of God was his strength. Deep faith gave him light in the darkness and enabled him to see the presence of God in a world where suffering, privation and violence appeared to reign. **A**



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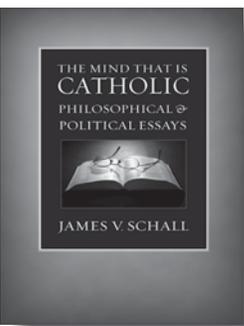
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Make Straight a Highway

The second in a series for Advent and Christmas

BY JAMES J. DIGIACOMO

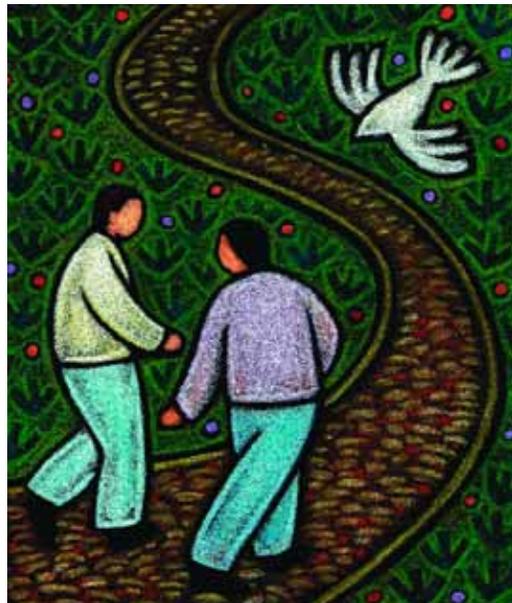
ONE OF THE MOST prominent figures in the religious drama that plays out during the run-up to the birth of Christ is John the Baptist. The Advent liturgy is replete with accounts of the sayings and actions of this prophet, the most powerful preacher of his day. He was a colorful figure who looked like someone who lived mostly outdoors and survived on a limited diet. He held no regular job in the synagogue, but conducted an open-air church on the banks of the Jordan River that drew crowds of people from all walks of life. They came away feeling inspired and challenged, and if we listen to him the same thing could happen to us.

John's message was simple: "The Messiah is coming, and we have to get ready for him." John proclaimed the coming of Christ in the words of Isaiah the prophet: "Make ready the way of the Lord" (Is 40:1); "all mankind shall see the salvation of God!" (52:10). The religious leaders in the synagogue were supposed to help prepare the Jewish people for God's anointed, but the people who came down to the river had long since given up on them. The word had gotten around: Listen to this man John. He knows what he is talking about. He does not settle for pious platitudes or legalistic scolding. He is tuned in to God, and he has a program that is going somewhere.

Unlike some charismatic preachers of our own day, John did not settle for an hour of preaching that charged up the congregation for a while but never got down to the nitty-gritty. John told them that a lot had to be done; they had to get their lives in order. He did not settle for generalities, either. When the people asked him what they should do,

JAMES J. DIGIACOMO, S.J., is the author of many books on youth ministry and religious education.

he said, "If you have two shirts, give one to the man who has none." To those social outcasts, the tax collectors, he said, "Don't collect more than your fixed rate." When even soldiers came looking for advice, he told them to stop bullying people, not make false charges,



be content with their pay and not fatten up their paycheck.

Not everyone who came down to the riverbank was looking for help. Some members of the religious establishment stayed in silent hostility on the fringe of the crowd, checking out this religious maverick. John really let them have it: he called them a "brood of vipers." (That must have cut down on the collection when they passed the hat around.) He was not out to make friends or soothe his hearers; he had come to tell it like it was and call them to account. The coming of Jesus Christ would be good news if you were good; if you were bad, you had better shape up because time was running out.

And he did not settle for words. John's ritual was dramatic: confess your sins, walk

into the river, be submerged and come back up ready for a whole new life. It was not supposed to be just a harmless bit of religious formalism. It was the beginning of a journey, and they had a long way to go. In the words of Isaiah, "Make straight a highway for our God! Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill shall be made low" (Is 40:3-4).

We all have valleys and hills in our lives. On the road to Christmas, Jesus wants us to prepare for his coming by filling those valleys and clearing those hills. Some of the valleys are called laziness, selfishness and irresponsibility. Some of the hills are called addictions, cheating, dishonesty and taking advantage of others. And those are just samples. (For further research, check out the Ten Commandments.) We have to face up to our faults and failings, admit them to ourselves and to God, and try to do something about them. That's being honest. It can be very difficult sometimes, but we are not alone. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, is on the way to help us.

John was a great preacher, not because he had a new doctrine or a new approach, but because he told people what they knew deep down in their hearts. Some were so moved by him that they thought John might be the Messiah. But he told them it was not about him but about someone far greater than they could imagine. John's ritual of immersing in water was powerful, but it was nothing compared to what was to come—baptism in the Holy Spirit.

As the kids say in the back seat, "Are we there yet?" No, but the end of the highway is coming up soon. Advent, the time for preparing to celebrate the birth of Christ, is passing swiftly. If you want to move beyond shopping lists in getting ready for the great event, listen to John the Baptist.

ART BY JULIE LONNEMAN

Germany's Race Religion

BY G. K. CHESTERTON

AT LEAST SIX TIMES during the last few years I have found myself in a situation in which I should certainly have become a Catholic, if I had not been restrained from that rash step by the fortunate accident that I was one already....

I will take first the example of the latest turn of political events in Europe. I take it first because it is both typical and topical; that is, it gives perhaps the clearest and simplest example of the sort of thing I mean, and it is a thing of which the facts are fresh and familiar to everybody, even those who live only from day to day with the assistance of the daily press, that very synthetic substitute for daily bread.

But in order to explain what I think has really happened rather more lucidly than the daily press explains it, it is necessary to say a preliminary word about the Protestant Reformation and the sense in which its consequences, rather than itself, continue to bewilder and mislead Christendom....

The real Protestant theologians were such very bad theologians. They had an amazing opportunity; the old Church had been swept out of their way, along with many things that were really unpopular, and some things that were deservedly unpopular. One would suppose it was easy enough to set up something that would at least look a little more popular. When they tried to do it, they made every mistake that they could make.

They waged an insane war against everything in the old Faith that is most normal and sympathetic to human nature; such as prayers for the dead or the gracious image of a Mother of Men. They hardened and fixed themselves upon fads which anybody could see would pass like

fashions. Luther lashed himself into a sort of general fury, which obviously could not last; Calvin was logical, but used his logic for a scheme which humanity manifestly would not long find endurable....

They did not really think what they were doing; and this was chiefly because the real driving force behind them was the impatient insolence and avarice of new nobles and rebellious princes. But, any-



how, the theological and theoretical part of their work withered with extraordinary rapidity; and the void that was left was almost as rapidly filled with other things.

What those things were is clear enough in many cases, including cases much more apparently harmless; but it is clearest of all in what is confronting us today; the race religion of the Germans....

A superbly typical story reaches me from Germany; that some of the Nazis started to sing the great reformer's famous hymn, "A strong fortress is our God" (which sounds quite promisingly militaristic), but found themselves unable to articulate the very words at the beginning of the next verse, which run, "Of ourselves we can do nothing."

Luther did, in his own mad way, believe

in humility; but modern Germany believes simply, solely, and entirely in its pride....

Luther was subject to irrational convulsions of rage, in one of which he tore out the Epistle of St. James from the Bible, because St. James exalts the importance of good works. But I shudder to imagine into what sort of epileptic convulsion he would have fallen, if anybody had told him to tear out the Epistles of St. Paul, because St. Paul was not an Aryan. Luther if possible rather exaggerated the weakness of humanity, but at least it was the weakness of all humanity.

John Knox achieved that queer Puritan paradox, of combining the same concentrated evocation of Christ with an inhuman horror and loathing for all the signs and forms and traditions generally characteristic of Christians. He combined, in the way that puzzles us so much, the adoration of the Cross with the abomination of the Crucifix. But at least John Knox would have exploded like dynamite if anybody had asked him to adore the Swastika....

It is obvious by this time that the hollow places that were once filled with the foaming fanaticism of the first Reformation doctrines are now filled with the foaming fanaticism of a totally different kind. Those who are rebelling like Luther are rebelling against Luther.

The main moral of this is so large and simple and striking that it will soon be impossible to conceal it from the world. It is the simple fact that the moment men began to contradict the Church with their own private judgment, everything they did was incredibly ill-judged; that those who broke away from the Church's own basis, almost immediately broke down on their own basis; that those who tried to stand apart from authority could not in fact stand at all. **A**

PHOTO: TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY PICTURES

G. K. CHESTERTON (1874-1936) was an English writer of philosophy, poetry, biography, fiction, journalism and apologetics. This article first appeared in **America** on Sept. 29, 1934.



Read the entire text of this article, at americamagazine.org/pages.

Book Reviews

Polling the Other

Who Speaks for Islam?

What a Billion Muslims Really Think

By John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed
Gallup Press, 230p \$22.95
ISBN 9781595620170

Even in the best of times, American popular understanding of Muslims has been informed more by stereotype and suspicion than reality. But since the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, many perceive the divide between “us” and “them” as a chasm too wide to cross. Anti-American sentiment is up in the Muslim world; and in the West, we have coined a new term, Islamophobia, to describe a growing prejudice.

The distrust has its sources. The spread and frequency of terrorist attacks by an extremist minority, the escalation of hate speech by commentators on both sides of the divide and the rhetoric of political leaders, who speak of an “ideological struggle” between the freedom-loving West and fanatical Islam, have helped foster the view that differences are irreconcilable and all-out war inevitable.

But is it?

No, say John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, authors of *Who Speaks for Islam?*, a book that persuasively argues policies rather than principles are what divide us. Their work is based on a mammoth, multi-year Gallup research study of the Muslim world. Between 2001 and 2007 the American polling organization surveyed tens of thousands of residents in more than 35 countries, a sampling that represents 90 percent of Islam’s 1.3 billion adherents. Mogahed, a senior analyst and executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, and Esposito, a professor of religion and international affairs and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University and founding director of Georgetown’s Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, pored over the Gallup data looking for insights to key questions: What is the root of anti-Americanism? Who are the extremists? Do Muslims desire

democracy; and if so, what might it look like? Its five chapters include a basic but invaluable presentation of the main tenets of Islam, followed by substantive analyses of Muslim views of democracy, gender justice and the prospects for co-existence.

The authors supplement Gallup’s data with articles, reports and analyses of recent incidents of “culture clash.” Included here are insightful discussions of the Danish cartoon controversy and Muslim reaction to Pope Benedict XVI’s address at the University of Regensburg, Germany, in September 2006. What emerges is a far more nuanced presentation of the Muslim world than our media and pundits provide.

The authors’ intent is to democratize a debate that has been dominated by “extremists” and “experts.” Their data surprises and discourages. Muslim admiration for the West is stronger than presumed, as is American hostility toward Muslims. According to the Gallup survey, “they” don’t hate us for our freedoms. Technology and democracy are at the top of the list for what Muslims around the world say they most admire about the West. By contrast, 57 percent of Americans surveyed could identify no admirable attribute for Muslims; 22 percent said they would not want a Muslim for a next-door neighbor.

Fueling the misconceptions is the tendency to pit a monolithic West—a coherent unit defined by democracy, human rights, gender equality and separation of church and state—against a monolithic Muslim world with starkly different values. But Gallup’s data refutes this reductive view, revealing commonalities between the two worlds as well as the diversity of Muslim perspectives. Like Americans, Muslims believe attacks on civilians are morally unjustified, and they are more likely to condemn them unequivocally. (Forty-six percent of Americans, versus 80 percent of Iranians, think such attacks are “never justified.”) When asked about dreams for the future, Muslims did not mention waging jihad but

finding better jobs. As for political aspirations, most Muslims want neither secularism nor a theocracy. They want rights and democratization but also believe society should be based on Islamic values and that *shariah* (Islamic law) should be a source of law. If this fusion of religion and state worries some, consider that 50 percent of

Americans believe the U.S. Constitution should be based on the Bible. How much *shariah* should inform legislation varies widely among Islamic countries. Some of the book’s most fascinating sections parse these divergent views.

According to Esposito and Mogahed, history and politics, more than religion, explain why democracy has eluded so much of the Muslim world. U.S. policy on democracy in

the Middle East resonates with the majority of Muslims surveyed, who say they value greater self-determination. But European colonialism and more recently U.S. intervention in the region, including the occupation of Iraq and the rejection of legitimately elected parties in Palestine, have left many Muslims skeptical of America’s “democratic” agenda.

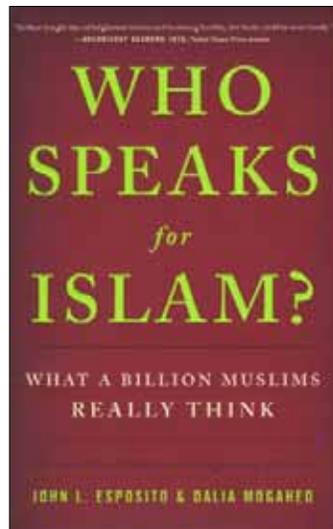
Skepticism is highest among political radicals—the seven percent of Muslims who said they thought 9/11 was justified. Contrary to popular opinion, they are not illiterate, impoverished or hopeless. Many are highly educated (engineers and physicians), more satisfied than moderates about their financial situations but also more cynical about the United States permitting people “to fashion their own political future.” To diagnose terrorism as a

The Reviewers

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy, a freelance writer, is a member of the Saints Francis and Thérèse Catholic Worker Community in Worcester, Mass.

The Rev. John Jay Hughes is a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Louis and the author, most recently, of the memoir *No Ordinary Fool: A Testimony to Grace* (Tate Publishing).

Peter Heinegg is a professor of English at Union College, Schenectady, N.Y.



symptom and Islam as the problem, though popular in some circles, is flawed and has serious risks, argue the authors. Such a view alienates the moderates, contributes to the perception that Islam is under siege and obscures evaluation of what really foments the Muslim/West divide. When asked how the West could improve relations with their societies, most Muslims advised showing greater respect for Islam and re-examining our interventionist policies.

Published earlier this year, *Who Speaks for Islam?* is especially timely now as a corrective to the maligning of Muslims that escalated during the U.S. presidential campaign. Obama-bashing relied heavily on depicting him as a closet Muslim, unworthy of American trust. The book's approach is ingeniously appropriate for American readers. We are a statistics-obsessed people who look to numbers to inform us about everything from our religious tolerance and psychological health to how much corn we consume. Why not then use polls to determine the view of the other? In this instance, curiosity, that great American virtue, might spare us more misunderstanding and conflict.

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

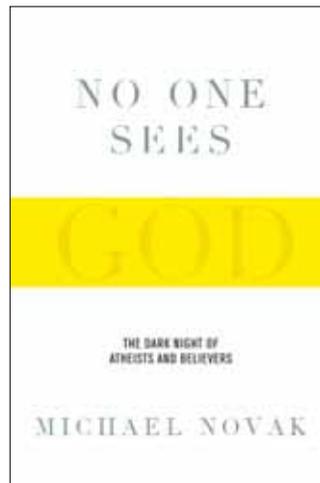
ible" (Heb 11:27).

Plato, Aristotle and all the ancients (with rare exceptions) knew—not merely believed—that there is a first principle of intelligence suffusing the world. Unaided human reason led them, as it can lead us, to acknowledge that God exists. Such knowledge still leaves us in darkness, however, about who God is. That God can be described only through metaphor is a central truth of both Judaism and Christianity. "No man sees me and lives," God told Moses (Ex 33:20). Indeed, Scripture speaks of the "thick darkness" encountered by those trying to draw close to God (Ex 20:21; 1 Kgs 8:12).

In the search for God, I realized long ago that I belong to those who are "borne on eagle's wings." Too simple-minded to feel the force of the arguments against God's existence, from childhood I have

believed it all: God, Trinity, angels, the communion of saints, sacraments, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. For me it is all simply and obviously true. I resonate with the psalmist's twice-repeated verse: "The fool has said in his heart, there is no God" (Ps 14:1; 53:1). How reassuring to discover recently that I too am in good company. Writing in the October 2008 issue of *First Things*, Richard John Neuhaus confides his own "enormous sense of relief" at discovering in his youth the confession of the Church of Scotland theologian, Donald Baillie, "that as long as he could remember he could not not believe in the existence of God."

Why has God made belief easy for some but so difficult for others? Perhaps it is because those who "labor sweatily" are made of sterner stuff. Addressing those who find belief not merely difficult but impossible, Novak puts forth his "under-



A Sweaty Struggle

No One Sees God

The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers

By Michael Novak
Doubleday, 336p \$23.95
ISBN 97803855261

"Some of us labor sweatily" in the search for God, Michael Novak writes, "others are borne on eagle's wings." That Novak himself finds the search a sweaty and laborious struggle is clear on every page of this powerful book. He wrote it, he tells us in his preface, "for people who, like me, have spent long years in the dark and windswept open spaces between unbelief and belief." He is in good company. He gropes through darkness with people like Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, St. John of the Cross, Job and Moses, who, as Scripture says, "endured as seeing him who is invis-

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lying thesis: that unbelievers and believers need to learn a new habit of reasoned and mutually respectful conversation.” Atheists and believers alike, Novak contends, stand on common ground. No one can reach God through the senses, imagination or memory; not even by a clear, distinct concept. “The only knowledge of God we have through reason...is dark—and by the via negativa, that is, by reasoning from what God cannot be. Direct empirical knowledge of God could only be of a false God.” Here too Novak is articulating a central affirmation of both Judaism and Christianity.

Throughout *No One Sees God*, Novak (who holds the Jewett Chair in Religion, Philosophy and Public Policy at the American Enterprise Institute) models the reasoned and mutually respectful conversation he asks of others. He calls Christopher Hitchens, one of today’s most articulate atheists writing in English, a friend and “one of the writers whose courage and polemical force I highly admire,” in particular for Hitchens’s willingness to criticize his ideological soulmates when they are wrong on some important matter—“the acute threat from

Islamofascism, for example.” Moreover, “Hitchens does his homework and he thinks clearly. If you go to debate him, you had better think things through rather carefully and well, for his is a well-stocked, quick, and merciless mind.”

Novak faults atheists, however, for their unwillingness to question their own positions. While claiming to “question everything,” the currently popular books of atheists like Sam Harris, Daniel C. Dennet and Richard Dawkins contain no evidence that their authors have ever questioned their own atheism or the cruelty and mass bloodshed perpetrated in the last century by totalitarian regimes claiming to be motivated by “scientific atheism.”

Though atheism is pervasive in American universities today, both in its hard version (hatred of religious belief) and its soft one (denial that there is such a thing as truth, but merely a myriad of opinions), “it has not proved persuasive to huge numbers of students, who hold their noses and put up with it. Why does atheism persuade so few? Our [atheist] authors never ask.” Moreover, “Everywhere on earth except Western Europe, religion is

surging.” Atheists offer no explanation for this surge save as the triumph of superstition over enlightenment.

No review can possibly do justice to the riches offered in the pages of this book. Even at his most forceful, Novak maintains the courtesy and respect he asks of his opponents. An appendix reprints the lecture he delivered in London’s Westminster Abbey in May 1994, when he received the Templeton Prize, given annually to an “entrepreneur of the spirit” who has made an exceptional contribution to “affirming life’s spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works.” The inclusion of this text is a plus—a ringing affirmation of the importance of truth, honesty and courage.

John Jay Hughes

Desperate Housewives, Irish-Style

Yesterday’s Weather Stories

By Anne Enright
Grove Press. 320p \$24
ISBN 9780802118745

Well, not all the protagonists of these 31 stories are married women (a few, teenaged or older, are unattached), and not all of them are desperate (some are just miserable or variously distraught). But they form a sort of sisterhood: sometimes unfaithful (their husbands are no better), almost always angry (at men, the world, themselves) and without exception sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued—not that any amount of sharpness will lessen their pain. This collection of vignettes—most coming in at or under eight pages—may be appearing now to cash in on the afterglow of the Man Booker Prize, which Enright won for *The Gathering* in October 2007. And at least a few of the items are recycled from earlier books; but no matter. Working mostly in the first person, Enright endows her unhappy sorority with as much quiet power, fierce intelligence and virulent honesty as ever—enough to make popular American images of

female alienation look utterly infantile.

Hazel, in the title story, has things fairly easy: she's just wrestling with exhaustion, irritability and a messy baby at a picnic lunch with her bothersome sister-in-law's family. And Michelle in "Caravan" is simply coping with an awful camper holiday in France. More typical cases are Catherine in "Honey," caught between grief for her dying mother and resentment toward the office Don Juan for not pursuing her; or the unnamed narrator of "Pale Hands I Loved, Beside the Shalimar," who is married to a "hairy old baby" but adores a gentle psychotic who won't take his meds; or of "Little Sister," who watches her sibling die of anorexia; or of "What You Want," who meditates bitterly on the downside of getting what you wish for, in her case a husband named Séamus Molloy ("a big man, he was the man in the whitest shirt, and I had to throw him out finally, before the baby came to any harm.")

The new Ireland Enright shows us is promiscuous but unfulfilled, lapsed but not liberated, moneyed but not really enjoying it, godless but without a replacement. Parents now take longer to die, so that old agony has worsened. The Irish travel a lot more. The narrator of "Historical Letters" gets abandoned in El Paso; Alison in "Pillow" goes off to college in America and shaves her head like Sinéad O'Connor; Kate's parents in "The Cruise" get as far as the Caribbean, but she knows they will never leave the country again. The Irish are more cosmopolitan and sophisticated. But above all, Irish women are speaking up more; and Enright is there, with her perfect pitch, to capture their different accents.

Here, for instance, is a middle-aged woman, from "Until the Girl Died," with a periodically wandering husband whose mistress has died in a car crash:

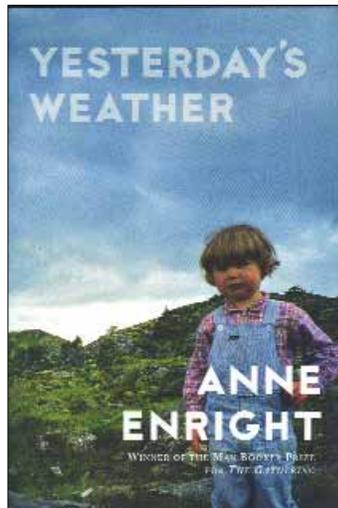
And he can't tell me, because I really do not want to know. All this

in hindsight, of course. At the time, I looked at him and I thought that our marriage was finished, or that he was finished. I was looking at extended sick leave and then what? My husband crying on the sofa was forty-nine years old. And if you think forty-nine is a tough station, try fifty-five.

Here is the 16-or-so-year-old narrator of "Natalie":

Billy's mother (who I really like, actually) got cancer last year and she came home from her first chemo session high as a kite from the steroids and she told Billy—told them all in fact—that she didn't love their father any more, had never loved him in the first place, and once her chemo was over the marriage was too. It was like, "I'm alive! I'm alive! I'm not going to waste my life any more!!!" At least, that's how Billy described it. Then all her hair fell out, and she was sick as a parrot for the next six months, and Billy's just looking at his da and his da is looking at him—and you know there's nothing wrong with Billy's da, he's a genuinely lovely man—and he is bringing her four hundred cups of green tea a day while she lies on the sofa with a face on her that says, As soon as this is done, then I am out that door.

Can any English speakers anywhere talk better than Dubliners? Voices, voices. You want slightly thuggish working class? Enright can do that: try "Indifference." Well-kept bourgeoisie? No problem: see "The House of the Architect's Love Story." Wild eccentrics? There is a memorably daft saleslady in "(She Owns) Everything." When she ventures into the grungier side of life, Enright can even sound like Raymond



Carver. And she has a propensity for Carveresque dead-ends, though her characters are less sodden with booze, and Enright feels closer to Joyce than to Carver—or his master, Chekhov—in her colder authorial distance from the wretches she impersonates.

To be fair, not all of Enright's characters are stressed or bitterly disillusioned. The aged heroine of "Della" brings sympathy and biscuits to her blind neighbor, Tom Delaney. The mocking young woman on vacation in "Seascape" is frankly delighted with her "lumpish" lover, though he won't go in the water. Along with their vials of acid, these women also pack perfume. But the world is still more full of weeping than you can understand, as Yeats said; so they spray that acid liberally for both self-defense and self-definition. Nora Barnacle (Joyce's wife and the model for Molly Bloom) would sympathize. Cathleen Ni Houlihan (traditional patriotic Ireland) might not.

Peter Heinegg



Richard Leonard, S.J. on the fantasy films of 2008, at americamagazine.org/podcast.

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THOMAS MERTON'S 40TH ANNIVERSARY of death will be observed with a memorial Mass at Corpus Christi Church, 529 West 121st St., New York City, on Dec. 10, 2008, at 7:00 p.m. Visit www.corpus-christi-nyc.org.

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Jan. 1, 2010. Address all inquires/résumés to: Guest House Inc., Search Committee, 1601 Joslyn Road, Lake Orion, MI 48360; Fax: (248) 391-0210; e-mail: mmiller@guesthouse.org. Visit our Web site at www.guesthouse.org.

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PRESIDENT. Building on 100 years of tradition in academic excellence, Academy of Our Lady of Mercy—Lauralton Hall, Milford, Conn. (www.lauraltonhall.org), is seeking a visionary and dynamic President. This Catholic secondary school (grades 9-12), enrolling 450 young women, is sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy. Applicants must be practicing Catholics and possess the minimum of a master's degree in education or a related field, successful secondary school administrative experience and a demonstrated commitment to Catholic secondary education for young women. The successful applicant will have demonstrated expertise in institutional advancement, financial management, and strategic and operational planning, and must possess excellent leadership and communication skills, working collaboratively with both internal and external constituencies.

Salary is competitive and commensurate with experience. Interested and qualified candidates are asked to submit electronically a letter of introduction, résumé, the names, addresses, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of five professional references, and a statement addressing the significance and importance of Catholic secondary schools for young women to: Academy of Our Lady of Mercy, President Search, Catholic School Management Inc., Attn: Jennifer C. Kensel, at office@catholicschoolmgmt.com. Review of applications will begin Jan. 1, 2009, and continue until the position is filled. Position is available July 1, 2009.

PRINCIPAL. Divine Savior Holy Angels High School (www.dsha.info) in Milwaukee, Wis., a Catholic, college preparatory secondary school for young women sponsored by the Sisters of the Divine Savior, is seeking a dynamic and collaborative Principal. Building on 116 years of tradition in academic excellence and commitment to single

gender education, Divine Savior Holy Angels High School attracts over 650 students from all over southeastern Wisconsin. The new Principal will be an energetic and committed instructional leader who exemplifies the Catholic mission of the school, embodies the charism of the Sisters of the Divine Savior and demonstrates a commitment to Catholic secondary education for young women. The successful applicant will understand and be committed to whole person education, be passionate about deepening D.S.H.A.'s commitment to continuous improvement, encourage diversity and model life-long learning, and participate fully in the life of the school. The new Principal will be a relationship builder who is comfortable working in a president/principal model of administration and will demonstrate the ability to think and plan strategically for the future. A successful applicant must possess a minimum of a master's degree in education or a related field; hold an appropriate administrative license or have the ability to obtain it; demonstrate successful experience in Catholic, public or independent school administration; have teaching experience; and be a person of the Catholic faith. Position is available July 1, 2009. Salary is competitive and commensurate with experience.

Interested and qualified candidates are asked to submit electronically a letter of introduction, a résumé and a statement concerning the significance and importance of Catholic secondary education for young women, as well as the names, addresses, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of five professional references to: Divine Savior Holy Angels High School, Principal Search, Catholic School Management Inc., Attn: Lois K. Draina, at office@catholicschoolmgmt.com. Review of applications will begin Jan. 15, 2009, and continue until the position is filled.

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Letters

Those Immortal Chaplains

I cannot believe that in the article on military chaplaincy by John J. McLain, S.J. ("Showing God's Face on the Battlefield," 11/17), you did not tell the story behind the picture of that famous postage stamp which you used to illustrate the article; surely not every reader will recognize it. In 1943, the U.S.S. *Dorchester* was attacked and sunk. Four chaplains, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish, helped to get as many men as possible into lifeboats. Eventually the four gave away their own life jackets to others, and prayed with those who would most likely not survive. At last sight, the four chaplains were gathered in a circle with their arms around each other as the ship went down.

This kind of heroism characterizes the chaplain corps.

*Kristeen Bruun
North Richland Hills, Tex.*

Animal Liberation

Re your item on ecology, "Do Rocks Have Rights?" (Current Comment, 11/10): Can animals have rights? That depends on what is meant by a "right." Many animals have legal protection, as do many of us who are in no position to secure it on our own. Courses on animal law pull together a body of law that has been developing since the early 19th century. It is not new law.

Further, animal law does not have to do with the concerns of environmental law. Its ultimate focus has always been on animals as individuals, not fungible, that can suffer and may have independent interests of their own, in contrast with the focus in environmental law on animals as parts of ecological systems.

*Joseph Vining, Esq.
Ann Arbor, Mich.*

Paul's World

Thank you for publishing the articles on St. Paul's life, the society around him and its influence on his writings ("The Legacy of St. Paul," 11/10). As a reader and lector who sometimes struggles to bring life and emotion to the Sunday readings, I found the articles put Paul's words into a context that will help me (and others, I hope)

breathe energy and emotion into his works as they are read aloud. Such articles help us to appreciate the rich context of our Scriptural readings.

*Frank Sturm
Dumfries, Va.*

Intelligent Designs

The book review by William Reiser, S.J., of *Ancestral Grace*, by Diarmuid O'Murchu, M.S.C. ("And the Word Became Primate?" 11/10), reminded me of the great theologian Thomas Aquinas, who embraced the best "science" of his day, rethinking Christian doctrine with the thought of Aristotle as a background. In the short run, he got into considerable trouble with established thought. In the long run, however, the believing community was greatly enriched because of what he did.

The best science of our modern time is evolutionary science. Those who take the 13.7 billion-year story of the unfolding of the universe as a starting point for theological reflection see it as God's primordial and foundational revelation. It is a story that suggests new images and metaphors for the divine.

Thinkers of the 21st-century, including theologians like Father Reiser and social scientists like Father O'Murchu, are invited to engage this new hermeneutic creatively. They can expect considerable tension between resulting insights and more familiar traditional teachings. Over time, however, they can expect their own lives and those of the believing community will be enriched.

*John Surette, S.J.
La Grange Park, Ill.*

Anarchy

In "A Past Without a Future?" (11/3), Mark Silk and Andrew Walsh describe Senator Joseph Biden as "strongly support[ing] *Roe v. Wade* on the grounds that he does not want to impose his religious views on those who do not share them."

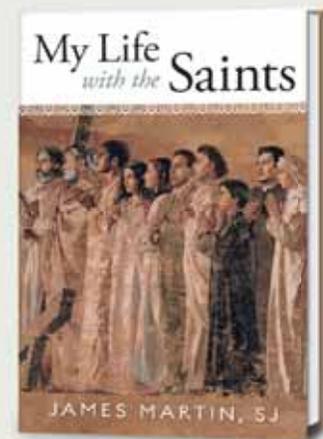
Every law is an imposition of someone's views on others who may not share them. If we accept Senator Biden's stance on abortion, where do we stand on issues such as torture, help for the poor and the

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Letters

environment? As long as I do not have to torture or exploit or pollute, should others be free to do so?

It is not clear how Biden's reasoning ultimately allows for any laws.

*Emily Spear
Rochester, N.Y.*

Shoulder to Shoulder

Leaving the moral argument aside, your editorial on refugees ("A Refugee World," 11/3) is an exercise in naïveté. The United States cannot take in all the people in the world who would like to come here, because that would be ecologically and economically impossible, even before our current financial meltdown. Some well-meaning Christians, it seems, will not be satisfied until we are all living shoulder to shoulder in beehive housing complexes and when open spaces are distant memories.

For these people, the Kingdom of God on earth cannot come to be until the entire earth resembles Tokyo.

*Richard Dubiel
Stevens Point, Wis.*

Divine Love

I found "Dragen, Here Is Your Letter," by Lyn Burr Brignoli (11/27), very moving, but was touched even more by Brignoli's religious experience and her ability to reflect on it in true Ignatian fashion. She moves from an "abstract God" to a "deeper experience of God beyond mere logic," then starts "to transcend the boundaries of doctrine and enter into the heart of God" and finally "to catch a glimpse of the compassion of God."

I am an 87-year-old Jesuit who has been blessed with ministry in spiritual direction and retreats, and found this story to be a wonderful reflection on the experience of God revealing himself and befriending us.

*Louis J. Lipps, S.J.
Cincinnati, Ohio*

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Rejoice Always

Third Sunday of Advent (B) Dec. 14, 2008

Readings: Is 61:1-2a, 10-11; Lk 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54; 1 Thes 5:16-24; Jn 1:6-8, 19-28

“There is one among you whom you do not recognize” (Jn 1:26)

ON THIS SUNDAY, called *Gaudete* from the Latin for “rejoice,” rejoicing is a thread that weaves through all the readings, from the joy of the exiles returning to Jerusalem to the rejoicing of Mary in the Magnificat (the responsorial psalm) to Paul’s insistence that the Thessalonians rejoice at every moment. What is notable in each instance is that joy is not a vague sentiment or an abstract concept. It wells up in response to very concrete signs of God’s providential care.

Isaiah’s list of what makes for glad tidings is very familiar: healing of broken hearts, liberty for all who are captive, release for those imprisoned. It is the same mission that Jesus claims for his own in Lk 4:18-19. These freeing acts are prescribed for the jubilee year in Leviticus 25. Every 50 years debts are to be erased, land returned to its original owners, and those held bound are to be released. We do not know whether the jubilee year was ever observed the way it is described in Leviticus, but jubilee practices are always in season, especially in Advent.

In a year when many are constrained financially, jubilee gifts are especially appropriate. They cost nothing but an open and giving spirit. For example, extending forgiveness to someone I have held bound with resentment can be like clothing them with a “robe of salvation,” or wrapping both of us in “a mantle of justice,” as we accept God’s saving work of reconciliation in our lives. This is an extravagant gift—one more valuable than a bridegroom’s “diadem” or a bride’s

“jewels.” It is the kind of gift that makes a springtime of new possibilities burst forth in the midst of winter.

In her Magnificat, Mary’s rejoicing is caused not only by God’s mysterious workings in her own life, but by all the ways in which God’s mercy has been manifest in every generation. Mary sings of a

Praying With Scripture

- What is your greatest cause for joy? How do you share your joy with others?
- How would you answer the question, “Who are you?” Would others say the same about you if they were asked?
- How do you recognize the One in our midst and point out that divine presence for others?

leveling: all who had been hungry are filled to satisfaction, and those who had gorged themselves to excess are emptied out. Justice, as Mary envisions it and as her son later enacts it, is not a reversal of fortune, so that those who had plenty are now wanting, while those who were wanting now have the excess. Rather, right relationship, in the biblical view, is that all have enough to eat and none go hungry. To accomplish this, those who had hoarded too much have to relinquish some to the rightful owners, that is, those who had been made poor by others’ greed and who have a right to eat and be satisfied too.

How are we to cultivate an open and generous heart that moves us to give these kinds of gifts? Paul advises the Thessalonians and us to do three things constantly: rejoice, pray and give thanks, no matter what the circumstances in which we find ourselves. If we stay centered on God, the Spirit remains aflame in



ART BY TAD DUNNE

us, and we are able to discern truth and follow its demands. By giving thanks at all times, we let go of any sense of entitlement or covetousness. Paul would have us recognize that the ability to do this is itself a gift—one that God, who is faithful, will accomplish in us.

In the Gospel, we hear John the Baptist using Isaiah’s words to present himself as “the voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” This was John’s answer to the religious leaders who wanted to know, “Who are you?” John first says who he is not. He is not the Christ, that is, the “Anointed One” or “Messiah.” The Greek word *christos*, like the Hebrew word *mashiach*, “anointed,” designates one who is set apart by God for particular service, like kings (Ps 2:2; 89:20), priests (Lev 4:3, 5) and prophets (1 Kgs 19:16). There were many differing expectations among Jews of Jesus’ day about a coming anointed one. Some thought Elijah would return to purify the priesthood (Mal 3:2-4) and restore the tribes of Israel (Sir 48:10); others expected a prophet like Moses (Dt 15:18). John accepts none of these designations for himself. He is simply the one pointing toward the expected one. He himself is not “the light”; he came to testify to the light and bring others to believe through his testimony. In a certain sense, though, John is a light to others. Just as effective lighting in a room does not call attention to itself, but rather enables you to see what is in the room, so too John is not the focus, but rather points to the one who is the light. This expected one is already in their midst, and in our midst. Do you recognize him?

Barbara E. Reid

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