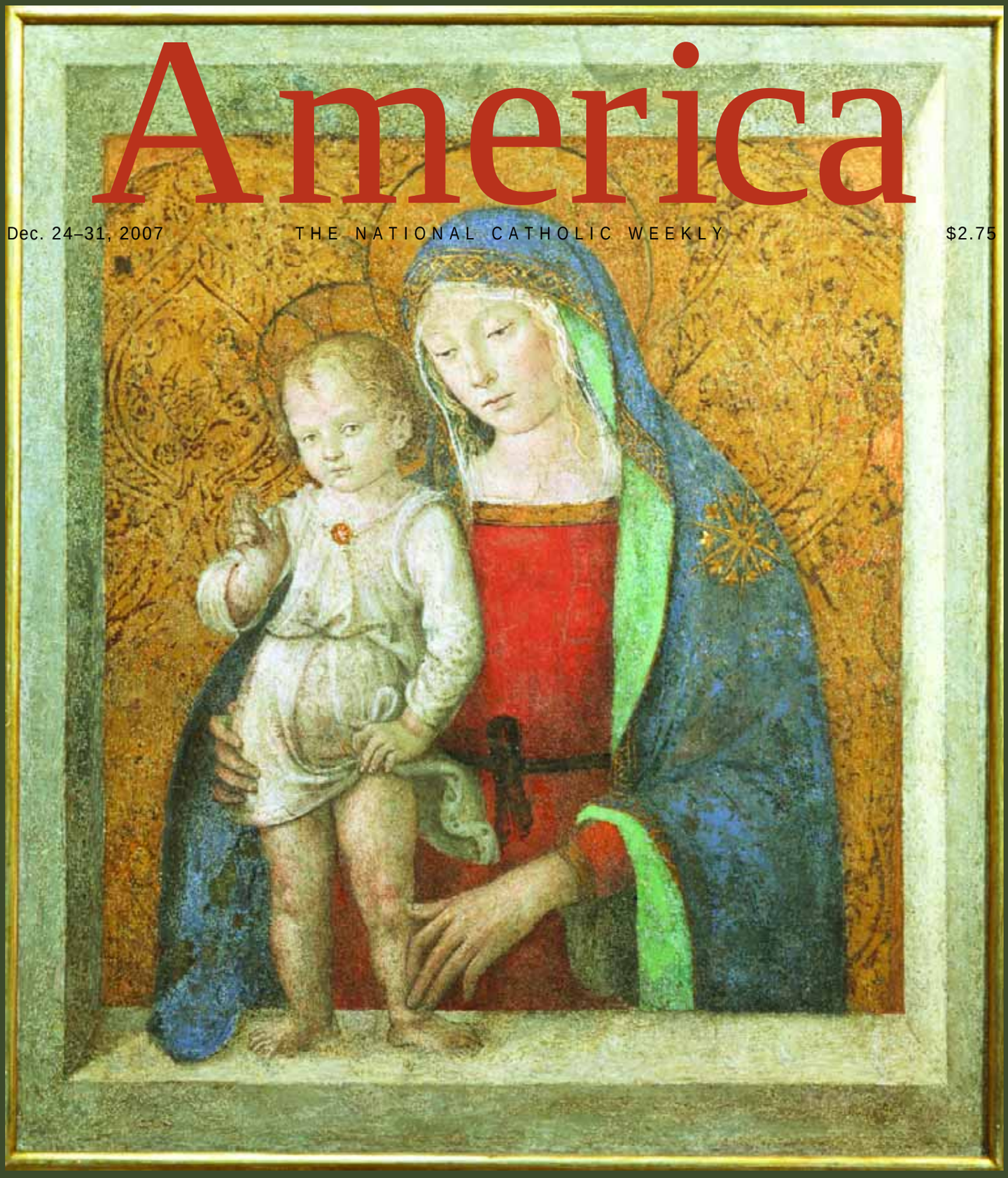
America

Dec. 24–31, 2007 THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY $2.75



Christmas 2007

Of Many Things

IT POURED RAIN the entire day that Christmas in Georgia, but we never let it dampen our spirits. I was visiting close neighbors, Sam and Beth and their young son. The three of us had prepared a vegetarian feast of succulent grain dishes, vegetable medleys, fruits, nuts, goat cheese and breads, not to mention our own vintage wines and liqueurs (mine was blueberry), which we spread on a table set for nibbling and dining. My hosts kept the wood stove popping and the room cozy as we sat rocking on our chairs. We sang a little and played guitar, recorder and flute. Best of all, though, we read aloud for hours on end. We took turns on the long stories and passed several books around so each of us could select another. This was no typical act of reading to the children, though their toddling son had many books, and during breaks we set him on this or that adult's lap and read directly to him. No, we read aloud for ourselves, for the sheer pleasure of it.

The books we read from were new to me. One of them, *The Gifts of the Child Christ and Other Stories and Fairy Tales*, by George MacDonald, a 19th-century writer of fantasy, I later purchased. Since then I have read aloud three of the stories at Christmastime: "The Gifts of the Child Christ," "Stephen Archer" and the final biographical story, which the author intended to be read aloud and so made it brief, "Birth, Dreaming, Death."

What I find appealing in these stories, which are not Catholic by the way (MacDonald had aspired to be a Protestant minister), is that MacDonald describes how people help each other to discover "the Divine" in their midst. The author believes in the power of love to heal broken spirits, reconcile ruptured relationships and give meaning, even to lives still deemed difficult in other respects. And MacDonald, often through a narrator's voice, reveals much about how people grow into loving behaviors over time, yet, paradoxically, how even young children can display a wisdom that jolts adults into maturation. Phosy, a quiet, sober five-year-old in the title story, for example, brings her family together in its hour of desperation one Christmas through her developing religious sensibility.

MacDonald's tales, like Dickens's, are moralistic and reflect the class conflicts of his day. These traits combine to create humorous portraits, like that of Alice, the nursemaid in "The Gifts of the Child Christ," who speaks to her employers of her work as "domestic slavery," a philosophy she has obviously picked up elsewhere, and who gets her comeuppance, as well as her man, in the end.

In winter especially I gravitate toward 19th-century tales full of cold stormy nights, unexpected guests, waifs, burly menacing men, horses and other animals, characters poor in material wealth but rich in goodness, tales set in some huge dark house or inn where they gather. I also like the arduous journey motif. My tastes tend toward classics, like Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" and O. Henry's "Gift of the Magi"; but I also use collections and Christmas treasuries, which contain stories by Madeleine L'Engle, Henry van Dyke, Pearl S. Buck and J. R. R. Tolkien. Christmas stories are available by Dylan Thomas, Anne Perry, Nora Roberts and even Truman Capote. And one can read favorite scenes from novels, like the Christmas tree-catching scene from Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. The point is to read aloud whatever the readers and listeners find satisfying.

Reading aloud invites participants to read publicly, imagine and listen actively, while it draws them together around shared texts, turns of phrases and common characters. And it works its magic even among nonreaders. One Advent my mother and sister visited me in New York. Since they had never come at Christmastime, I rushed the season with a blue spruce from L. L. Bean delivered to my apartment in Brooklyn. After we did city things, I booked us into a bed and breakfast in Cold Spring, a Hudson River hamlet a short train ride away. Our room had a wood stove that we lit each evening, and I brought stories to read aloud. I had never heard my mother read aloud before, but I enjoyed both her style of reading and her enthusiasm. My sister, after a second of shyness, also got into the swing of it and we made our evenings merry in a whole new way.

I'd love to know which books and stories readers recommend for reading aloud, not only at Christmas, but all year long.

Karen Sue Smith

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Published by Jesuits of the United States

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Cover art "Madonna and Child" by Bernardino Pinturicchio (1454-1513). Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY

www.americamagazine.org Vol. 197 No. 21, Whole No. 4799 December 24-31, 2007

Articles

This week @ America Connects

Flannery O'Connor on "The Church and the Fiction Writer." Holiday reading picks from the editors, and a Christmas podcast with James Martin, S.J. All at americamagazine.org.

Killing the Death Penalty

The U.N. General Assembly is expected to call for a worldwide moratorium on executions in a plenary session this month. Although it will not bind individual countries, abolitionists see the resolution as carrying moral and political weight. They also believe it will encourage nations that still use the death penalty to review their capital punishment laws. Currently, 133 have abolished it, either by law or in practice. Since 1990, over 50 countries have done away with it. Recent examples include Liberia, Rwanda and Ivory Coast, along with Paraguay and Mexico. In Europe and Central Asia, Albania, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey have also become abolitionist governments.

Only 25 countries carried out executions in 2006. Of these, most took place in China, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan and the United States. China's were the most numerous: 1,010, although credible sources believe the number could be as high as 8,000. Iran was second with 177 put to death. Support for the death penalty in the United States has been falling, not least because of fears that innocent people might be put to death. Since 1973, 124 death row prisoners here have been released after it was found they were innocent of the crimes for which they were condemned to death. The United States should follow the lead of the United Nations and ban this cruel and unusual punishment.

Toward More Intelligent Intelligence?

The publication of a National Intelligence Estimate in early December on the state of Iran's nuclear weapons development contradicted the conclusion of a previous estimate published in 2005.

The earlier report affirmed "with high confidence" that Iran was determined to develop nuclear weapons despite international sanctions. The 2007 estimate, however, revised that judgment, stating "with high confidence" that Tehran had halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003. The later estimate was based on recent interceptions of statements by Iranian military leaders criticizing their government's decision to stop the program. The more recent report undercut the pugnacious rhetoric of the Bush administration threatening military action if Iran continued its program of nuclear development. The collective decision of the 16 members of the National Intelligence Council to revise dramatically its earlier conclusion was undoubtedly influenced by the realization that unreliable intelligence reports in 2002, conditioned to some extent by the political agenda of the administration, had led the nation into the unnecessary and costly preemptive invasion of Iraq.

Later in the same week, Gen. Michael V. Hayden, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, informed Congress that in November 2005 the agency had destroyed hundreds of hours of videotapes of interrogations of Al Qaeda agents. The struggle to develop and maintain an intelligence community that can successfully protect the national interests of the United States while remaining faithful to its constitutional values continues.

Candidate Index

With apologies to Harper's Magazine

Total Number of Candidates: 16
Total Number of Candidate Marriages: 25
Candidates who are Catholic: 5
Candidates who used to be Catholic: 2
Candidates who have had Catholic Education: 6
Candidates who have had Jesuit Education: 1
Candidates who are Catholic or Formerly Catholic or Catholic Educated and are Pro-Life on Abortion: 1
Candidates with Pets: 9
Candidates with Dogs: 7
Candidates with Chocolate Labs: 4
Most Pets: 22
Favorite Food is Fresh Fruit and Vegetables: 1
Favorite Food is Red Meat: 4
Favorite Food is Mexican: 1
Candidates who have been or are...
Teachers: 6
Doctors: 1
Lawyers: 9
Homeless: 1
Bankrupt: 1
Pastor: 1
Bishop: 1
Mayor: 2
Governor: 3
Representative: 7
Senator: 8
Representative and Senator: 3
First Lady: 1
President: 0
Played One on TV: 1

For details, see page 38.

The First Visitors

THE ELABORATE NATIVITY SCENES we assemble in our homes (and the occasional public space) during the season of Advent usually display more figures than the Holy Family alone. Jesus and his parents are often surrounded by angels, attentive barnyard animals and (sometimes just a short distance away, as if their journey is almost complete but not quite) the three "wise men from the East," whom the Gospel of Matthew mentions as the first human visitors to pay homage to the Christ Child.

Over the centuries those astronomers have been transformed in our shared cultural imagination into wealthy kings, crowned and bedecked in sumptuous robes, fitting attendants for a monarch destined to rule over all nations. Only in Matthew's Gospel are the wise men first on the scene, however. Luke's account of the nativity tells us that the lucky first arrivals to the manger were local shepherds, alerted to the birth of Jesus by an angel of the Lord. "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened," they decide immediately, "which the Lord has made known to us." In our modern nativity scenes and crèches, these shepherds usually receive short shrift in favor of the exotic scholars whose study of the heavens showed them the way to Bethlehem. It is a little harder, perhaps, to sell ourselves on the thought that shivering, dirty-faced teenagers in coarse tunics should be the first royal retinue for the King of Kings.

St. Francis of Assisi, who is credited in legend with building the first Christmas crèche, would likely have preferred the poor shepherds, simple peasants with no gifts for their Savior but their reverence and devotion. According to St. Bonaventure's account of the legend, Francis' original nativity scene in the Italian town of Grecio in 1223 was for him a living devotion. The ox and the ass were real creatures borrowed from neighbors, and on the night before Christmas almost eight centuries ago Francis himself stood watch over the manger, "full of devotion and piety, bathed in tears and radiant with joy." Standing behind him in homage were the local peasants of Grecio. Many of them would have been shepherds, too, leaving behind their own flocks to join Francis in this new celebration of Christ's birth.

The first visitors of Luke's account have another important link to the story of Jesus that goes beyond their proximity to the manger. They tended their flocks in the region of Bethlehem, the erstwhile home of Israel's most beloved shepherd boy, David, who even when he was in the entourage of Saul still returned to tend his father's sheep at Bethlehem. The flocks these shepherds cared for could well have been the descendants of the sheep David watched over so many generations earlier; some of the shepherds themselves might also have been descendants of the royal line. Not surprising, then, that Luke's angel of the Lord who appears to the shepherds makes the connection explicit: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

The child of Jesse was another unlikely king, born of humble roots and knowing the simple existence of a shepherd before he was chosen by God for a different life. "I took you from the pasture and from following the flock, to be ruler over my people Israel," God tells David, before making him an astounding promise: "I declare to you that the Lord will build a house for you: When your days are over and you go to be with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son" (1 Chr 17:10-14). From the line of one shepherd came the Good Shepherd, born homeless but to be the great builder of his Father's house.

BOTH GOSPEL ACCOUNTS of the first visitors to the Holy Family offer us a valuable reminder. Shepherds and Magi; ignorant and wise; manual laborers and bookish scholars; Jews and Gentiles; poor and rich; bringing offers of material gifts and showing outpourings of spontaneous devotion. The catalogue of differences between the two groups is vast indeed, but there is one striking similarity. When they realized the good news that a Savior had been born, neither suffered second thoughts. Both abandoned their tasks—one group leaving the sheep under their guard, the other perhaps dropping their sheepskin parchments—and struck out to place themselves in the presence of the Lord. They remain for us today a reminder that Christ came for all, not just for the learned and wise and not just for his own humble people, but to be that great joy for all the world.

Pope Expresses Hopes for Dialogue With Baptists

Pope Benedict XVI told Baptist and Catholic representatives he hoped conversations between the two denominations "will bear abundant fruit for the progress of dialogue and the increase of understanding and cooperation." The pope met privately at the Vatican Dec. 6 with more than 20 delegates who were in Rome for a meeting of the joint international commission sponsored by the Baptist World Alliance and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Pope Benedict said if reconciliation and greater fellowship between Baptists and Catholics is to be realized, certain issues "need to be faced together, in a spirit of openness, mutual respect and fidelity" to the Gospel. He said some of the "historically controverted issues" that needed further discussion are "the relationship between Scripture and tradition, the understanding of baptism and the sacraments, the place of Mary in the communion of the church, and the nature of oversight and primacy in the church's ministerial structure."

Interfaith Effort Launched to Fight Terrorism

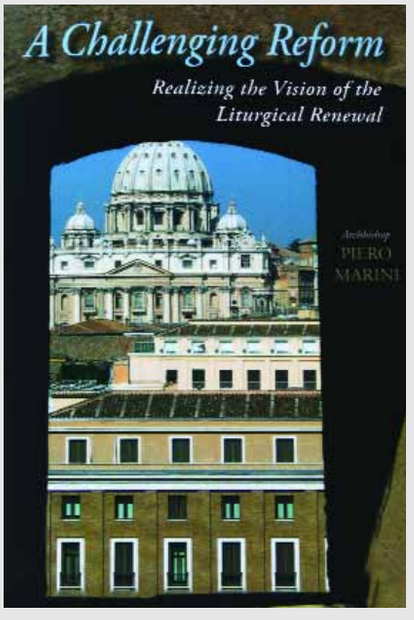
Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, the retired archbishop of Washington, led a group of religious leaders Nov. 30 in announcing a national interfaith grassroots campaign to oppose terrorists and protect Americans from the violence for which they are responsible.

The campaign is being launched by Cardinal McCarrick; Rabbi Jack A. Luxemburg, chief rabbi of Temple Beth Ami in the Washington suburb of Rockville, Md.; and the Rev. Samuel T. Lloyd III, dean of the Washington National Cathedral of the Episcopal Church. "This is...a monumental step," Cardinal McCarrick said. "This is the family gathering to say thanks be to God, the one God that we all worship.... We're all his children."

Citing work that had been done before to achieve peace in the Holy Land with representatives of different faiths, the cardinal said: "What we found is that we can work together.... What unites us is so much greater than what divides us."

An Insider's View of Liturgical Reform

In a new book, a Vatican archbishop has chronicled the birth pangs of the liturgical reform generated by the Second Vatican Council and warned of a tendency of the Roman Curia to return to a "preconciliar mind-set." The book, *A Challenging Reform*, was written by Archbishop Piero Marini, who recently ended a 20-year tenure as papal liturgist. His Vatican career began in 1965 in the office charged with implementing liturgical renewal. Archbishop Marini recounted the rise of a decentralized and dynamic reform movement in the 1960s and its "curialization" in the 1970s by Vatican officials afraid of losing control. Many of the hard-won liturgical changes were accompanied by tensions and disagreements inside the Vatican's central bureaucracy, he said. The archbishop's book, published by Liturgical Press, was scheduled for presentation Dec. 14 in London, where the author was being honored at a reception hosted by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor.



Bishops Warn: Book Could Mislead Faithful

Peter C. Phan

A Vietnamese-American theologian's 2004 book on religious pluralism contains "pervading ambiguities and equivocations that could easily confuse or mislead the faithful," the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine said in a Dec. 10 statement. The Rev. Peter C. Phan's book, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*, published by Orbis Books, also contains "statements that, unless properly clarified, are not in accord with Catholic teaching," the committee said. In its 15-page statement, the committee said it undertook an evaluation of *Being Religious Interreligiously* at the request of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and "invited Father Phan to respond" to questions. "Since Father Phan did not provide the needed clarifications, and since the ambiguities in the book concern matters that are central to the faith, the Committee on Doctrine decided to issue a statement that would both identify problematic aspects of the book and provide a positive restatement of Catholic teaching on the relevant points," said the statement, signed by Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., chairman, and the six other committee members.

Father Phan, a former Salesian and now a priest of the Diocese of Dallas, holds the Ellacuría Chair of Catholic Social Thought in the theology depart-

From CNS and other sources. CNS photos.

ment of Jesuit-sponsored Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. William Burrows, Father Phan's editor at Orbis Books, said that "the matters alleged are serious and that he looks forward to a full airing of them in all their dimensions." "Father Phan," he said, "is a circumspect scholar, one of Asian Catholicism's most respected theologians, and everyone should realize that he has not had the opportunity to respond to the bishops' concerns with the level of care he devotes to all weighty matters."

Gordon Zahn, Co-founder of Pax Christi USA, Dies

Gordon Zahn, a co-founder of Pax Christi USA, the U.S. branch of the international Catholic peace movement, died Dec. 9 in Wauwatosa, Wis. Zahn, 89, had been suffering from Alzheimer's disease. A conscientious objector during World War II, Zahn became a noted sociologist and author. His book *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars* documented the role Roman Catholics played in supporting Nazi aggression and raised hard questions about the abuse of just war teaching. Zahn's book *In Solitary Witness*, a biography of the Austrian conscientious objector Blessed Franz Jägerstätter—who was beheaded in Berlin for refusing to serve in Adolf Hitler's army—was used by Jägerstätter's wife and daughters to repeal Jägerstätter's conviction. Jägerstätter was beatified last October.

Because Zahn declared himself a conscientious objector during World War II, at a time when the church did not support such exemptions, he fought forest fires in New Hampshire for his alternative public service work. After the war, because of his pacifism, the only Catholic college to accept his enrollment application was Benedictine-run St. John's College in Collegeville, Minn. Even there, his presence was not welcome by students who had served in the war and some faculty members who had been military chaplains. Later, at the Second Vatican Council, he worked to advance changes in the draft of what became the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," which led to the council's call for Catholics to examine war with "a whole new attitude."

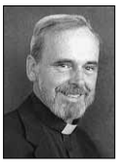
Polish Priest Criticizes Exoneration of Bishops

A Polish priest who researches the church's infiltration by Communist secret police has criticized the Polish bishops' conference for exonerating bishops of collaboration. "This is another attempt to square the circle," the Rev. Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski told the Polish daily Rzeczpospolita in late November. "Bishops are public people, pastors in their dioceses, and these documents should not be hidden. Doing so will fuel rumors and slander." The Polish bishops' conference said Nov. 22 that its Team for Ethical-Legal Evaluation had found no evidence that any bishop "knowingly and willingly collaborated" with Poland's Communist-era secret police. It said its researchers had found all claims of collaboration were "without proof" and added that it had now passed their reports to the Vatican and considered the matter closed. But Father Isakowicz-Zaleski said the team had erred in looking only for signed collaboration pledges and handwritten reports. He said "consent to collaborate was obtained" when someone met with a Communist officer.

Catholic Iraqi Refugees Free in Massachusetts

Left to right: Muntha Sooloka (holding daughter Eleana Yusuf, 3), Sarra Khoshaba, who is Hermez's mother, Raymon Yusuf, 4, Yusif Yusuf, 6, Huzni Hermez and Msgr. David M. George.

Following years of persecution and inability to attend Mass because of the threat of terrorism, Huzni Hermez and his family left their war-torn homeland of Iraq and found a place where they could freely practice their Catholic faith. With the cooperation of St. Anthony Maronite Catholic Church in Springfield, Mass., the Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts and the Diocese of Springfield, Hermez and his family arrived in Springfield Nov. 15. They are Chaldean Catholics, members of an Eastern Catholic church in union with the pope. Speaking of being forced to leave his homeland, Hermez told The Catholic Observer, the Springfield diocesan newspaper, through an interpreter: "That is real terrorism, when you are not welcome in your own country. Even if Iraq would be paradise one day," he added, the family would not go back. The horrible memories will never go away, he said.



In Defense of Human Life 2

'The Iraq war is largely about oil.'

—Alan Greenspan

IN MY PREVIOUS COLUMN (11/26), I recommended Francis Beckwith's book *Defending Life* for serious arguments in defense of human life at its earliest stage. Another powerful defense, more accessible and less technical, is forthcoming in *Embryo*, by Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen, to be published by Doubleday. This second book is particularly valuable for its critique of "body-person dualism," a position that supposes that our personhood somehow "enters" our bodies when we start thinking and then leaves our bodies when our higher brain functions stop—a key but false move in many arguments offered in defense of abortion and euthanasia.

Among the responses to my earlier column were complaints about my concentration on abortion. What about all the other life issues that deal with the already born? It seems the only thing that some pro-life people get passionate and judgmental about is embryonic life. Well, I agree with such complaints. We are very selective in applying our moral and religious convictions, as a recent media event displayed.

During the bizarre CNN/YouTube debate by Republican presidential hopefuls, a video participant held up a Bible to the camera and asked the candidates, "Do you believe this book, all of it?" Mike Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas and a Baptist minister, gave the best answer. Rather than get all worked up over particular texts, he advised, like the figurative "pluck out your eye," that we should, as Christians, first get the basics: love of God and love of neighbor. He then quoted Matthew 25: "Whatsoever you do to the least of these, you do to me."

It was a stirring response. But would it be equally jarring if applied to some of his other responses, especially his heartfelt explanation of how pained he was to execute so many people when he was governor? Was it painful because he was thinking of Matthew 25? "I was in prison"—and you executed me? Or "I was in prison"—and you tortured me? Or "I was a stranger"—and you locked me up and sent me away?

On this last point, about "undocumented aliens," Huckabee and especially John McCain are much better than the other Republican or Democratic candidates (McCain is the only one in line with Gospel values on the matter of torture). But all of them, like so many other Americans who affirm the dignity of human life, are quite selective in the application of the principle. The "pro-life" Hadley Arkes, for example, writes in the journal First Things that he could bite his lip and vote for Giuliani, presumably for the "traditional Republican themes: preserving the Bush tax cuts, seeking free-market solutions to problems such as medical care, and standing firm on the war in Iraq."

Tax cuts. Free-market medical care. War in Iraq. Interesting. Are these Gospel imperatives? Is there a pro-life concern for the "least" here? Or is it just American capitalism and power that make Giuliani palatable?

Tax cuts are primarily an appeal to greed. The sitting president has made clear his message: Who knows better how to spend your money than you? Forget the common good, forget the needs of the least, forget the fact that our military and infrastructure benefit the "least" the least.

Free market medical care. The great free market can exact a terrible price from "the least." Consider those newborn babies around the world who do not even have clean water, much less food or health care. Think of our own country, its infant mortality rates, its millions uninsured and the threat that "free market" health care is to caregiving.

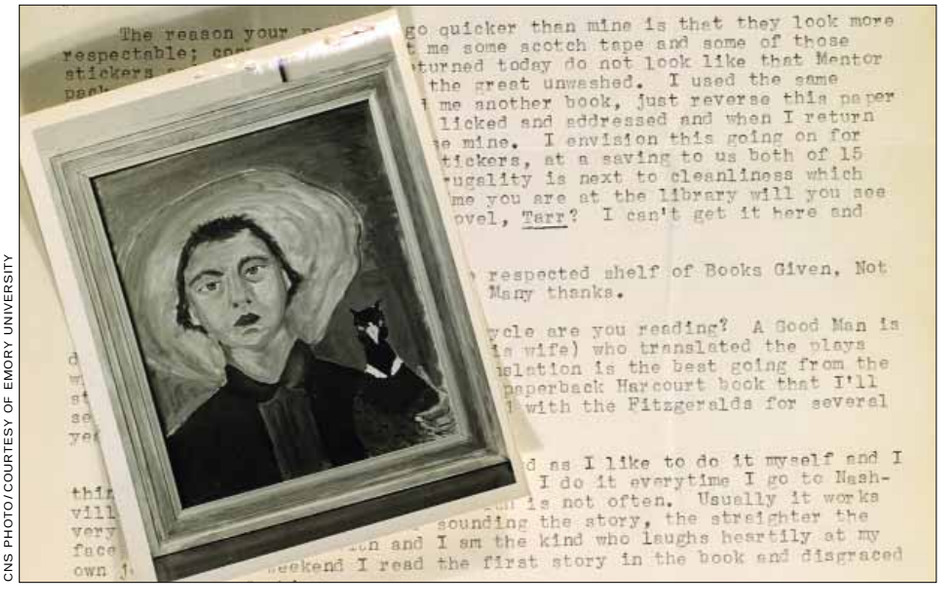
Finally, Arkes mentions the war in Iraq. Was invading Iraq a pro-life activity? What might we think of the million refugees, the hundred thousand dead (not by our hand, mind you, but because of the president's actions), the thousands of our own dead and so many more tragically maimed and diminished? Where are the "least" in all of this?

And as long as Christians support a pre-emptive, unjustified war of choice, they are fatally compromised. The Ayn Rand disciple and oracle of economics, Alan Greenspan, blurted out in his recently published memoirs, "I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil." He later tried to spin the truth (at the urging of our government?), but if this was indeed the reason for our Persian Gulf wars, it was an abominable reason, a disgrace. It is confounding to think that some Christians judge this to be of lesser moral importance than electing someone who merely offers pro-life rhetoric.

The American Catholic bishops remind us in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* of the range of immoral actions and policies that confront a conscientious believer. But I hope this will not be misread as a fixation on unborn human life. If it is, this will, sadly, be seen as a CNN-Huckabee moment. Those who are concerned only about abortion will applaud. Others, concerned about pro-choice wars, executing criminals and tearing apart "undocumented" families, will see this as just another proof that the only thing we Catholics are concerned about is prenatal life.

We now have two fine books by Christians who are "defending life" and protecting the "embryo." Where are the voices, the scholars, the theologians, the leaders who will make a courageous case for the born? ***John F. Kavanaugh***

JOHN F. KAVANAUGH, S.J., is a professor of philosophy at St. Louis University in St. Louis, Mo.



CNS PHOTO/COURTESY OF EMORY UNIVERSITY

A self-portrait of Flannery O'Connor with a letter she wrote in 1955.

Flannery O'Connor's Religious Vision

– BY GEORGE H. NIEDERAUER –

FLANNERY O'CONNOR DIED during the Second Vatican Council, while the bishops were writing anew what she had always known: that the church is the body of Christ, the people of God; that laypeople are its flesh and blood; and that the clergy and religious orders are its servant-leaders. While O'Connor was a supreme artist in fiction, she was also a particularly valuable witness to the Catholic Church and its leaders in this country, especially as she appears in her collected letters, *The Habit of Being*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald (1979). Hers is the testimony of a watchful, honest, faith-filled and eloquent layperson; and she had much to say about the experience of living the faith within the Catholic Church, especially in a society and a culture that had marginalized genuine Christian faith and practice.

Our present age has been described as one in which people place a high value on spirituality and a low value on religion, especially organized religion. Of particular interest, then, is O'Connor's thinking about the experience of church, of the assembly of believers. She valued the church highly and observed it acutely, warts and all. If the church made life endurable, it also provided much that had to be endured. "You have to

MOST REV. GEORGE H. NIEDERAUER is the archbishop of San Francisco. This article is an adapted excerpt from his Lane Center Lecture, delivered Sept. 28, 2007, at the University of San Francisco.

suffer as much from the church as for it," she once wrote. "The only thing that makes the church endurable is that somehow it is the body of Christ, and on this we are fed." She went on to explain why we suffer from the church: "The operation of the church is entirely set up for the sake of the sinner, which creates much misunderstanding among the smug." God is as patient with the entire church as he is with each lost sheep, and many of us Catholics have very little patience with either.

The church is made up of imperfect pilgrims on a long, difficult journey, and O'Connor described them well: "The Catholic Church is composed of those who accept what she teaches, whether they are good or bad, and there is constant struggle through the help of the sacraments to be good." In "Choruses from the 'Rock,'" T. S. Eliot says that modern people do not like the church because "she is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft." (Think of issues like abortion, euthanasia, welfare reform, capital punishment and more.) O'Connor might have appreciated Eliot's remark.

> The betrayal of religion is downright diabolical in O'Connor's view. The crucial choice is between the 'lost' life with Christ and the worldly 'saved' life without him.

The Human Element

Within the visible church, the Holy Spirit is constantly acting in the lives of its members, individually and collectively. Thus, the church cannot be accurately judged or evaluated by what her critics observe externally. O'Connor pointed this out to one of her friends:

> You judge [the church] strictly by its human element, by unimaginative and half-dead Catholics who would be startled to know the nature of what they defend by formula. The miracle is that the Church's dogma is kept pure both by and from such people. Nature is not prodigal of genius and the church makes do with what nature gives her. At the age of 11, you encounter some old priest who calls you a heretic for inquiring about evolution; at about the same time Père Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., is in China discovering Peking man.

The "human element" in the church was a frequent target of O'Connor's wit, as when she proposed this motto for the Catholic press of her day: "We guarantee to corrupt nothing but your taste." More seriously, she quoted St. Augustine's advice to the "wheat" in the church not to leave the threshing floor of life before the harvest is complete, just because there is so much of that disgusting chaff around! In this connection, she slyly suggested what the difficulty may be for more sensitive Catholics (referring to one young woman in particular): "She probably sees more stupidity and vulgarity than she does sin and these are harder to put up with than sin, harder on the nerves."

Meanwhile, the world goes on judging the church in utilitarian fashion, using the same standard it would apply to the Rotary or the Kiwanis. O'Connor challenged this approach, writing that "any Catholic or Protestant is defenseless before those who judge his religion by how well its members live up to it or are able to explain it." The surface is easy to judge, she was saying, but not the interior operations of the Holy Spirit. She illustrated this principle with a touching reference to the vocation of Catholic priests, whom she often found to be overworked and unimaginative:

> It is easy for any child to find out the faults in the sermon on his way home from church every Sunday. It is impossible to find out the hidden love that makes a man, in spite of his intellectual limitations, his neuroticism, his lack of strength, give up his life to the service of God's people, however bumblingly he may go about it.

While O'Connor defended her church against superficial and unfair judgments, she was neither a whitewasher nor a fatalist, and she was an implacable foe of complacency. She believed that the church must struggle toward greater virtue as surely as each of its members. She wrote quite forcefully in this regard: "It's our business to change the external faults of the church—the vulgarity, the lack of scholarship, the lack of intellectual honesty—wherever we find them and however we can."

Flaws in the Church

Here are three examples of faults in the church that O'Connor criticized and wished to see corrected. I think they are in order of increasing severity.

First, she condemned smugness as the great Catholic sin. Now, 45 years later, perhaps something else would head her list; but smugness would probably still be listed. Referring to the German priest and author Romano Guardini, she wrote about smugness: "I find it in myself and I don't dislike it any less. One reason Guardini is a relief to read is that he has nothing of it. With a few exceptions the American clergy, when it takes to the pen, brings this particular sin with it in full force." About 20 years ago a bumper sticker appeared that read: "If you feel God is far away, guess who moved?" If O'Connor had lived to see one of those signs on a Georgia road, I like to think that she would have skewered the sentiment as very smug, even as she chuckled at the rampant vulgarity of bumper-sticker theology.

Related to smugness is glibness, which she described as "the great danger in answering people's questions about religion." Again, a sense of mystery will give the Christian apologist a sense of humility: if I am convinced that I have the truth about God, I am much more likely to be obnoxious about it than if I am convinced that God's truth has me.

O'Connor expressed impatience with the kind of Catholicism—and Catholic fiction—that kept everything nice, shallow, cute and safe. She described what she called "A nice vapid-Catholic distrust of finding God in action of any range and depth. This is not the kind of Catholicism that has saved me so many years in learning to write, but then this is not Catholicism at all." Genuine Catholicism, she felt, must be as radical and demanding as its founder's teaching.

Still another Catholic fault O'Connor described is, I believe, an evergreen reality in the church: a Jansenistic disdain for human weakness and struggle and distrust of questions, speculations and discussions of any depth. Of the pseudo-faith of such persons she said:

> I know what you mean about being repulsed by the church when you have only the Mechanical-Jansenist Catholic to judge it by. I think that the reason such Catholics are so repulsive is that they don't really have faith but a kind of false certainty. They operate by the slide rule and the Church for them is not the body of Christ but the poor man's insurance system. It's never hard for them to believe because actually they never think about it. Faith has to take in all the other possibilities it can.

In considering such people's self-righteous judgments of others, she made an acute observation: "Conviction without experience makes for harshness." By contrast, Christians who have struggled with their demons are better equipped to show compassion toward others.

Religion Into Therapy

O'Connor had a deep distaste and contempt for modern, sanitized, "empty" religion. Because she embraced an imaginative vision of religion as the mystery of God's saving action intersecting with all that is earthly, O'Connor remarked to one correspondent: "All around you today you will find people accepting 'religion' that has been rid of its religious elements." Elsewhere she described this development in more detail:

> One of the effects of modern liberal Protestantism has been gradually to turn religion into poetry and therapy, to make truth vaguer and vaguer and more and more relative, to banish intellectual distinctions, to depend on feeling instead of thought, and gradually to come to believe that God has no power, that he cannot communicate with us, cannot reveal himself to us, indeed has not done so, and that religion is our own sweet invention.

The issue of religion bled dry of its content is featured in what is probably the most famous story told about O'Connor. As a very young and unknown writer, she was visiting New York and was taken to a party at the home of Mary McCarthy, ex-Catholic and ex-believer, a sophisticated and accomplished novelist, essayist and critic. What follows is O'Connor's description of the encounter:

> We went at eight and at one, I hadn't opened my mouth once, there being nothing in such company for me to say.... Having me there was like having a dog present who had been trained to say a few words but overcome with inadequacy had forgotten them. Well, toward the morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mrs. Broadwater [Mary McCarthy] said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the most "portable" person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it." That was all the defense I was capable of.

In *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (2003), Paul Elie writes of this exchange, "The closing remark is the most famous of all O'Connor's remarks, an economical swipe at the reductive, liberalizing view of religion."

O'Connor even locates one important moment in the development of this religious trend in this country. With some amusement she recalls a talk she gave at a college: "I told them that when Emerson decided in 1832 that he could

no longer celebrate the Lord's Supper unless the bread and wine were removed, that an important step in the vaporization of religion in America had taken place."

'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus'

For some readers one of the most surprising, even jarring, features of O'Connor's fiction is its consistently comic character, even as the stories and novels pursue such serious themes of faith and grace. Elie describes an experience the author had when visiting the Cloisters, a museum of medieval art in Fort Tryon Park in New York City: "She was 'greatly taken' with a wooden statue on display in one of the chapels. 'It was the Virgin holding the Christ child and both were laughing; not smiling, laughing.'" He concludes: "It was a piece to emulate as well as admire; like her own work, it was religious and comic at the same time."

The betrayal of religion is downright diabolical in O'Connor's view, and so it is portrayed in her fiction. For her, the crucial choice facing each of us is between the "lost" life with Christ and the worldly "saved" life without him. Thus, the most fiendish of temptations is to offer a saved, worldly life, but to offer it under the guise of being generically "Christian," though with no Christ content whatsoever.

In this connection Elie describes a type of character that appears over and over again in O'Connor's stories: "the middle-aged busybody who knows exactly what she thinks, who sees all and understands nothing." One example is the character of Mrs. May in the story "Greenleaf." At one point Mrs. May comes upon Mrs. Greenleaf in the woods, murmuring over and over again, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." O'Connor wrote: "Mrs. May winced. She thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building, like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true."

O'Connor had much to say about living together as church in the midst of modern culture, but finally we should turn to one simple statement she made about herself: "I write because I write well." Nearly 45 years after her death, believers and unbelievers alike agree with her more than ever. She wrote well. But there is so much more than that to be said of her. One point will suffice here: How wonderfully different Flannery O'Connor was from Mrs. May. She thought that the name of Jesus, the reality of Jesus, belonged everywhere, indeed was everywhere. Regarding the Christian faith, Flannery O'Connor was the polar opposite of Mrs. May, because she, of course, believed all of it was true. A

From the archives: Flannery O'Connor on "The Church and the Fiction Writer," at americamagazine.org.

Christ and Secular Sweden

An interview with Klaus Dietz about the Swedish church

BY JIM McDERMOTT

Sweden has a population of nine million, of whom approximately 150,000 are Catholic. **KLAUS DIETZ, S.J.**, *a German who is one of 17 Jesuits working there, has been serving in parish ministry in Sweden for 37 years.* **JIM McDERMOTT, S.J.**, *an associate editor of* **America**, *spoke to Father Dietz recently about Christianity and secularization in Sweden.*

How did you come to work in Sweden?

During my time in the Jesuit novitiate, Father Peter Hornung, one of the great Jesuits in Sweden, came and told us that Sweden is the area where we have to prove the future of Christianity in Europe. Many new and important ideas are born in Sweden and go from there to other countries. (Some funny examples: I think Sweden was the first country in the world to have the seatbelt, and also the helmet for bicycle riders.) And Father Hornung said if we can remain a living church in Sweden, then we can do it in all of Europe. If not, then in 5, 10 or 20 years, all of the traditionally Catholic parts of Europe will be without the Catholic religion, too. I found that very interesting and asked to come here.

What does Christianity look like in Sweden?

You have the state church and the free churches. The state church is the Lutheran Church of Sweden, which is called the Church of Sweden. Until the year 2000, when the Parliament officially dissolved the bonds between the Lutheran Church and the state, the state church was a part of the government, involved with state functions. Now there is no official relationship, but there remains a special connection. The king must be a member, and the crown princess, Victoria, must remain a member in order to become the queen. If someday the Church of Sweden were to decide to join the Catholic Church, in theory the Parliament could say no. So there are a lot of connections.

Among the free churches, which are not connected with the government, there are the Baptists, the Methodists, the Orthodox and the Catholics. From the middle of the 19th century up to the Second World War, there were about 5,000 Catholics in Stockholm, and perhaps an additional 5,000 elsewhere. Then came wave after wave of Catholic immigrants from Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary, Chile and other countries. Sweden has a very open attitude toward refugees. I've heard it said that since World War II, Sweden has received more refugees relative to its total population than any other country in Europe.

Most recently thousands of Arabic-speaking Catholics have arrived. Södertälje, a little place south of Stockholm,

PHOTO: REUTERS/OSSERVATORE ROMANO/POOL CRB/TC/JV

Pope Benedict XVI meets with Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustaf in the Vatican in 2005.

has received more refugees from Iraq than the whole of the United States has taken in.

What is the situation of the Catholic Church today?
Today the Catholic Church is the biggest free church of Sweden. We are nearly 100,000 Catholics, and if you add in the immigrants who were never entered into our registries, you have perhaps double that. Nearly every year we are building new parishes and churches.

We also have a good number of outstanding converts. The best professors of theology in Sweden are Catholic; and four members of the Swedish Academy, which selects the Nobel prize winners in literature, are also publicly known as Catholics. Interestingly, we also have among our converts a few women priests from the Lutheran Church.

Did these women find it difficult that they cannot continue to practice as priests?
Oh yes. One told me, "It's so hard to see concelebration—I should be up there, I should be there." She had been a parish priest all her life, retired some years before and became Catholic. Both she and the other woman I know studied theology and came to find the theology of the Lutheran church insufficient; the Catholic Church had the truth on certain questions and was closer to Jesus Christ and his teachings. And they said: "O.K., we have to pay the price; we have to leave our jobs. But it's a big price to pay."

What sort of challenges does the Catholic Church face?
First, the youngsters: children attend a Catholic parish until 15, 16, 17 years old, then many drop out. It's the same with Boy Scouts, sports groups and all the Christian denominations; at 16 years primary school is ended, the youth start upper education, and many drop out of their old groups.

The second area I would point out is immigrants. During their first three or five years in Sweden, immigrants feel at home in the Catholic Church; but then, when they are established and know the language, two-thirds of these Catholics disappear into the normal Swedish population.

What do you mean by "disappear"?
In Sweden, we have a very small number of active Christians. The latest European Value Studies report says about 9 percent of the population can be called Christians—that is, they believe Jesus Christ is the son of God, life after death, the triune God—traditional dogma. About 3 percent of the population participates in services every Sunday.

In Swedish society, religion is viewed as superstitious, old-fashioned, uninteresting, nonscientific, fanatical. The Catholic Church has the stamp of being fanatical and fundamentalistic because of its stances on abortion, homosexuality, homosexual marriage and the role of women in the church. The evangelical churches are thought too small, too controlling and also too fundamentalistic—they quote the Bible all the time, and they do not take on philosophical or theological arguments. The Church of Sweden has a wonderful framework, but the content is uninteresting.

How would you categorize the rest of Sweden's population?
Agnostic. They're convinced you cannot speak about God. Is there a God? Is there not a God? I don't know, they will say.

Religious experience in Sweden is such a private thing. In Germany, after drinking a while people will speak about their sexual experiences; in Sweden they'll talk about their religion. And if you ask one of them to make an appointment to talk further, he will not come. It's their most private thing, the most taboo.

Is people's apathy toward God, then, or toward religious institutions?
They're not interested in religion and they're not interested in God, either. You ask them and they'll say they don't need it. They're not aggressive, they don't debate, they don't want to have conflicts. They just tell you they don't feel the need.

Until he became famous in other countries, Ingmar Bergman was not understood in Sweden. There they said: he's so metaphysical; he speaks about the question of God. It's strange. Similarly Dag Hammarskjöld, former secretary general of the United Nations, was viewed in Sweden as this great political leader and outdoorsman. But when his book *Markings* was published, the Swedish people didn't understand it. In Europe, many students held it as a more important book than the Bible, but in Sweden it was considered strange.

Ninety percent of funerals, however, are church funerals. And we have national traditions like the feast of Santa Lucia, the 13th of December; in every school class and every factory on that morning, people will sing traditional songs. Every Swede knows them. A lot of people also read mystical texts like the Carmelite books, John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila. Again and again I will meet people who say, "I have read John of the Cross, but I'm not going to church."

What is the appeal of these writers to them?
I think people prefer their symbols and poetic descriptions, open to many interpretations. They find their own hazy feelings and insecurity affirmed in the mystical books. But they won't pay attention to the mystics' active, incarnational theology, their words about God, Jesus Christ, the virtues, the church. It's like Francis of Assisi—people say, Ah, this wonderful young man who speaks to flowers and then birds and the fish. But do they know what he says about poverty or the strict life in imitation of Christ? No. It's just the romantic side.

Converts—what attracts them to Catholicism?

Many times what attracts them is the reality of truth, the reality of sacraments, prayer life and liturgy. Most evangelical and Lutheran churches would say, if you feel this is the body of Christ, then it's for you. But it's your subjective feeling. Others feel differently.

For us Catholics what is important is the conviction that what is going on is the truth. To understand that is reality. Of course you have a connection with feelings; every song in the Mass and every silent prayer should help you not only to say in your brain, I believe God is here, but to respond in feeling—like, God I love you, I admire you. That's a part of it. But in the Church of Sweden and the evangelical churches, it's the main part.

Does the Catholic Church in Sweden have anything to teach the whole church?

One thing is democracy. When the church is not so clerical, this helps build up its identity. In Sweden laypeople play an important role in the life of the parish and diocese. They oversee the finances of the churches, and the priest must follow the will of the majority of the parish council. Even on the level of the bishops there is some lay involvement, though it could be better.

A second thing is what I call the reality of liturgy. The sacramental life in the Catholic Church is more traditional in form, in contrast to the Church of Sweden and evangelical churches, which adapt to Swedish trends. If you have a good liturgy combined with the atmosphere of the mystics—not too rational, with holy water and incense and processions and pictures—it will provide a sense that something special is happening. But you have to connect that with the human—a living parish, a community of many different people living together.

Does Christianity have a future in Sweden?

The European Value Study showed Sweden on the top in the development toward individualism. Each person has his or her own patchwork of individual convictions in theological and ethical questions. Every new generation, then, must be won for God and for the church one by one. And we have to inform our Catholics again and again that you have to swim against the stream at every point.

On the other hand, even besides the refugees, the number of Catholics is steadily increasing. Every year about 100 Swedes convert to the church; the Jesuit review Signum is the most respected national religious newspaper; and our Bishop Anders Arborelius is perhaps the best accepted Christian leader in Sweden. Therefore we look with confidence and optimism to the future. A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Mantra for a Dark December Night

At the interstices between the word & silence
between this time and no time
between what the word groans after & the no-word
that answers to nothing & is everything, thy mercy
Lord have mercy, Lord Jesus mercy.
Between the Utterer & the Uttering & the Word
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy
on this sinner, who dares not lift my eyes
sweet Jesus mother mercy.
Mercy on me the sinner mercy.
You who know my heart better
than it knows itself, you, my heart,
sweet Jesus mercy. You who
come among us, who took on our flesh
our tears our sweating selves, O Lord have mercy,
Lamb, sweet Lamb have mercy. You know
I love you Lord, you know the cost, sweet one,
sweet Jesus, Lord, be with me I beg thee hear me
and let my cry come on to thee here in this room,
this lonely office, this wring-wracked bed,
this road this car this cart whatever
and what does anything at all matter
Creator Lord of matter, Mater God, whom
I have glimpsed beside the candle on the darkened
altar when I least expected or deserved it
Lord sweet Lord have mercy on me the sinner.

Paul Mariani

PAUL MARIANI, professor of English at Boston College, wrote this meditation on the icon "Hagia Hesychia" (Holy Silence) by the **REV. WILLIAM HART MCNICHOLS**, of Ranchos de Taos, N.M. The icon is a rendition of an unusual 18th century Russian work depicting an allegorical representation of Christ as the female "Hagia Sophia" (Holy Wisdom) and the mystical Russian Jesus Prayer.

Newborn

The fifth in a series for Advent and Christmas

BY JAMES MARTIN

TWO YOUNG CHILDREN have helped me see the nativity of the Lord in a new way. Their presence in my life has made the Christmas story an entirely new experience.

When I first started meditating on the nativity as a Jesuit novice, my meditations focused on the theological import of the event. Happily, I have a fairly vivid imagination, so it was easy to imagine the birth scene "just as if I were there," as St. Ignatius Loyola suggests in his *Spiritual Exercises*. In my mind's eye, I could see the inky night, the crude shelter, the sleepy-eyed cows, the exhausted parents and the squalling baby. And it was easy to feel amazed by the Incarnation, when God chose to "pitch his tent" among us, as some translations of the Gospel of John have it (1:14).

But until the birth of my first nephew, I never appreciated how a newborn child can change everything. When he was born nine years ago, I was astonished by the way our family immediately changed its focus. Our hearts were now centered on a little child. What did he do yesterday? What is he doing today? What will he do tomorrow? How miraculous that God had created a brand-new person, someone we could never have imagined, who would change our lives. The same happened with my sister's second child, born two years ago, who is a gift in equal measure, but so different from the first.

Nor had I appreciated the accompanying worry, and sometimes fear, that goes with childrearing. (Still, I don't fully understand it, since I'm not a parent.) When I think about my nephews, I pray that nothing bad will happen to them, hope that they will be physically well and desire that they will be happy. But I know that at some point the world will be painful for them.

Most likely it was similar for Mary and Joseph as they pondered the future of their baby. While Luke's Gospel offers a brief sketch of how Mary discovered God's plan for her (2:26-38), we have little idea of her innermost thoughts attending the birth of her son. As the New Testament scholar Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J., says about the annunciation, "What really happened? We shall never know." We have even less insight into Joseph's heart; Mary's husband is completely silent in Scripture.

We can assume that Mary and Joseph must have gathered from a variety of sources—the angelic messages, the dreams, the unique birth of their son, the strange utterances of Simeon and Anna—that their baby's life likely would be a strange one, filled with unusual joys and sorrows. And so they protected him as best they could, first sheltering him from the elements and later, in Egypt, from Herod's murderous wrath. But did they know, even then, that they would not be able to protect him forever?

All of us are called to emulate Mary and Joseph. We are invited to listen carefully to God, to respond with a trusting yes (often, like Mary, after some questioning) and, finally, to bring Christ into the world—not in his flesh, but in ours and in other ways important today.

And we are called to nurture our faith, which can be as precious and fragile as a newborn child. This does not mean that we jealously guard our faith from the world, but that we understand that our faith and our vocations need to be nourished, cared for and revered as gifts from God.

These are calls for every Christian, no matter who we are or where we came from. In the Christmas vigil Mass, the Gospel reading is taken from Matthew, who details the genealogy of Jesus' family (1:18-25). That seemingly interminable list shows that the Messiah came from a long line of people who were not perfect. Within his family are a few unsavory characters. (You think your family is dysfunctional? Read Matthew.) Out of that holy but entirely human tree grew a new green shoot that would change everything.

How overwhelming the first Christmas must have been for Mary and Joseph. Few things can provoke such intense worry as a newborn child. Ask any parent. But few things promise such unreasonable hope, such unexpected change and such unbounded joy.

May your heart be newborn this Christmas. A

ART BY JULIE LONNEMAN

A Christmas podcast with James Martin, S.J., at americamagazine.org.

JAMES MARTIN, S.J., is acting publisher of **America** and author of *A Jesuit Off-Broadway.*

Two Surprise Guests

BY KAREN SUE SMITH

ART BY THE AUTHOR

THE SOCIAL WORKER and I belonged to the same parish, but we were merely acquaintances. So I was surprised when she called to ask whether anyone at our farm might be willing to take in a mother who had given birth during the night. There were perhaps 50 committed adults living at Koinonia Partners Inc. then. Koinonia is an ecumenical Christian community in south Georgia, formed in 1942 and still going. We operated a pecan plant and a 1,400 acre farm.

The hospital, the social worker said, was releasing a mother and her newborn in a matter of hours and they had nowhere to go. Because this woman was a vagrant without established residency in the county, the social worker could not tap the welfare system to obtain the housing, food stamps and other assistance she and the baby would need. Would we keep her gratis for just 30 days until she could establish residency?

While I no longer remember my deliberations at the time, in the end I said yes, I would take her in. It didn't seem like much to ask. At that time I lived in a two-bedroom trailer at the edge of a large field near the Koinonia office, pecan plant, woodshed and community dining hall. She wouldn't need a car to get around.

Driving the 10 miles to the hospital, I pictured this mother as a young black woman, like some of the students I tutored for the G.E.D. or like many parents with whose children I worked in summer educational programs and Vacation Bible School. Sumter County had a large black population; and Koinonia, one of its largest employers, hired blacks and lived alongside them. On farm property we had established a sweat-equity housing program for low-income families, all of whom initially, it turned out, were blacks. But when I walked into the hospital room, the woman I saw looked like she could have been my sister: blonde, of average height and not at all slim (for the record, my own sister is actually a slim redhead). What I noted most, though, was that she was palpably disappointed to see me. I would later learn from Linda (not her real name) that it was because I was a single female just a few years older than she (we were both in our 20s). She would have preferred to see a couple, middle-aged or older, who might parent her and be grandparents to her new daughter.

I told the social worker that I (and the farm) would provide Linda room and board until the new year, since I couldn't conceive of turning someone away in December, just before Christmas.

KAREN SUE SMITH is the editorial director of **America**.

Getting to Know Her

Over the next seven weeks or so, I learned much from Linda about what it is like to be one of 18 children, raised in a group home, spending your life longing to be adopted. Every Christmas some of the children in the institution were invited to a lush party at the home of a wealthy family. It was something of an audition, for the lucky children were "found" by their future parents there.

Now Linda was a mother, feigning ignorance about her pregnancy, as though nine months of body changes could sneak up on a woman, still hoping to be adopted herself, all the while fearing that someone might try to adopt her own child out from under her. It didn't help that one family at Koinonia had adopted a baby girl, one of a number of foster children. Or that another family was caring temporarily for a two-year-old whose mother was in prison; that mother feared the warden's wife would try to adopt her child.

It did not surprise me to find that Linda responded to her baby as she had seen others do. She enjoyed holding her, gazing upon her and talking to her; these were the Madonna moments, and they were precious. When Cindy (not her real name) would cry, Linda would be tender at first, but she had never learned patience. I had no experience as a mother, though I had mothered my sister a bit and was a sought-after baby sitter. In the middle of the night, I would listen as Linda threatened to throw Cindy out the window if she didn't shut up. I rehearsed ways of calming them both without seeming to intrude or convey that I felt the necessity to rescue the child. Despite my fears, nothing violent ever took place.

Seasonal Expectations

In my role as a self-appointed teacher, temporary "aunt" or guardian, I was impassioned about teaching Linda all I could in the few weeks we had together. And because I was a new Catholic, newly aware of Advent and the liturgical year, I wanted to create a meaningful, joyful experience. Hadn't I been graced with a young mother and a newborn babe in my own house at this auspicious time of year? I couldn't wait to put up an Advent calendar, explain to Linda what it was and how to open the doors. She wasn't Catholic, but had been raised a Baptist, just as I had been. It must have been obvious that I myself was more enthusiastic than she about all this, but her interest grew.

Every evening when we sat down to supper, we would say grace or read some Advent prayer and open a door on the calendar. I was trying to run a Catholic family holiday here.

I asked Linda if she would like to cook one night a week—something I did when I lived with a family on the farm—but she had never learned how. All the children had been kept out of the kitchen at the group home. At the farm I had learned to make chicken a hundred different ways, to bake bread and homemade granola, and I could teach her these skills if she wanted to learn. She didn't. So we started with her favorite easy-to-prepare foods: hot dogs and boxed macaroni and cheese, for instance—pretty wretched fare for a farm in wintertime. Still, it was progress and would help her later.

I may need to explain here that Koinonia was a Christian experiment. We partners tried to practice what we called "compassionate living," a simple, non-materialistic lifestyle directed outward. We lived in farm houses, received a food allowance ($7.50 a week in the late 1970s) and a small monthly stipend we worked out with the farm leader. Other than that, we shared vehicles, the noon meal and worship, and we worked for no wages at all. We tried to be frugal and resourceful; we were countercultural in many respects, making our own music and recreation; most households didn't own a television.

Listening to Linda's stories of growing up was like being hooked on a soap opera. She had left the group home without a high school diploma or any job skills. As a result, she had trouble finding and keeping jobs. That left her depending on anyone she could find, typically some fellow she met in a bar. She told stories well—desperation with a degree of swagger. In the telling, she used an expression I shall never forget: "he th'owed me away." In her life story, many people had thrown her out, like garbage.

Was she interested, I asked like some Pollyanna, in cutting down a Christmas tree and decorating the trailer for Christmas? My hope was to spend evenings with Linda making decorations and little gifts for families at the farm—a

Christmas she would remember. It also might help her learn to think about someone else for a change, a habit she had never had an opportunity to cultivate.

During the day I ran a small co-op grocery store, with a secondhand store adjacent to it. Whenever I saw anything there I thought Linda or the baby might like or use, I would buy it and squirrel it away for them for Christmas. One item was a pair of leather gloves with fur cuffs, which I loved and was sure Linda would too. The community was gathering a shower of practical gifts for the baby—many of them brand new—and for Linda's big move into town.

When we started to make paper ornaments, I realized that Linda could not cut with scissors; it was something she had never done. Yet Linda was savvy, smart and articulate in her way. While I was at work, she loved visiting other partners.

Gone Missing

One evening, in torrential rain, Linda and the baby went missing. Another partner volunteered his truck for the search; we found them in a bar in the next county over, unharmed. Linda was unapologetic. She said she had hitchhiked there. Perhaps she was homesick for her friends, but she had not told anyone where she was going, how, or when she planned to return. I could never decide whether she had simply acted as she always had, with no one to worry about her or to track her down, or had done it on purpose, even if sub-consciously, to see if we would look for her—a measure of real care. For several weeks, I went through the kind of things many a foster parent goes through with a teenager (though Linda happened to be 22 and a mother).

One Saturday morning, we took a walk to find a little Christmas tree to cut down. It was my idea of a perfect Christmas. I liked choosing it, axing it, setting it up and decorating it with our sad little cut-outs (all the ones too straggly to give away). Then I set out presents with "Linda" and "Cindy" written on them. This piqued her curiosity. I was pleased.

Christmas was almost here. I had planned and stocked food for our dinner. The social worker had called to say that Linda could move into an apartment near the Catholic church in town after New

Year. Everything was working out well. The baby was calmer, and small tensions seemed to have eased.

Very early on Christmas morning, I heard car doors slamming and a knock at the trailer door. "My sisters!" Linda exclaimed and asked me, "Can I take my presents?" Half-awake, I heard myself say, "Yes, of course," as I scrambled to put on a robe. But before I got there, Linda had whisked them into a bag, was out the door with Cindy, and the car was backing out, barely in view. I could scarcely take it in. Where had her sisters been? Had all this been arranged? I felt so bereft, startled and alone that I cried like a spoiled child.

Then it dawned on me that I had never made any real gifts of my own to give friends at the farm. Nor did I know what other families were doing, so caught up had I been in our celebration.

I decided to make a linoleum print and carved out an image of a strong-armed Mary in an apron and toque, kneading bread. "Make us the bread, Mary, we need to be fed" it said, a line from a song called "The Bakerwoman." Then I printed enough for everyone, hung them to dry and went that evening to present my gift to each family, one by one.

Before New Year, Linda came back for a couple of days, but we kept some emotional distance. The next week I and a few other partners moved Linda into her new apartment—nice, clean and downtown. For a while she would come to Mass and we would chat afterward and make a fuss over the baby.

THE STORY DOES NOT COME to an inspiring end. I would have wished for something like this: a young single mother, embraced by Koinonia and the local Catholic Church, reforms her life and rears a happy child. What happened is that I left the farm that summer for theology studies at Notre Dame, then left it for good in September. I lost touch with Linda and Cindy. Later, I was saddened to hear that she was charged with a crime and lost custody of her child, at least temporarily. I don't know what happened after that. While I did more than I was asked, it was a lot less than those two needed, and I feel some responsibility for letting go so easily. The story has no pretty ribbon tying it up.

That Christmas I learned that Linda's real family was her sisters, that, not surprisingly, she preferred to be with them for the holiday, even though she had never mentioned their whereabouts to either the social worker or me. Need brutalizes a person, and desperation can make one crafty and self-protective. Living under someone else's roof doesn't change that in a few weeks.

In retrospect I have learned that the Christmas card image of Jesus' birth—a family scene filled with light, joy, angelic music and the adoration of shepherds and wise men—can be misleading. It does not describe adequately the world into which Jesus was born. God entered a dark, broken world, rife with squalor, violence and suffering, a world that needs a savior. What generates Christmas light and joy is God's presence in that world.

So it was with us that Advent. God's Spirit was there with us, blessing the house. Every Advent for 30 years, I have thought of Linda and her tiny daughter, heard that baby cry and her mother answering down the hall. And I am grateful that God brought us together then and is with us still. A

Brother Lawrence and the Chimney Bird

BY STEPHEN MARTIN

As I laid my cellphone on a bookshelf near the door and stepped outside into the late winter afternoon, I remember thinking, What can happen in just 30 minutes?

True, my wife's due date for our first child was just a few weeks away. It's also true this fact made me quiver on occasion like an over-bred hunting dog. I was a man with many worries, desperate to be updated and informed at all times, and so my cellphone went with me everywhere. On this day, though, more than anything I needed a head-clearing run through the neighborhood, so I left the phone behind—just this once.

A couple of miles later I came chugging up the hill toward my house. The stop sign that served as my finish line lay just ahead. I was approaching a state largely foreign to me—relaxation. That should have tipped me off. As if on cue, the screen door of my house burst open, and my wife appeared on the front stoop. She was yelling. For me. Good God, I thought, veering blindly across the road and up the driveway, What now? Is she sick? Is the baby on its way?

"Calm down," my wife told me as I lunged, heaving and fearful, up the steps. "It's not the baby. But we've got a problem. A bird just came down the chimney."

To understand why the drama now unfolding is worth an essay, it helps to know how this day started—with an early morning dash to the emergency room. My wife awoke that Sunday morning with pain and soreness in her calf. Not a big deal, it seemed. But a quick call to the doctor yielded disturbing news. In a pregnant woman, these symptoms could be the sign of a blood clot. We went straight to the hospital, where we spent the morning talking with doctors and agreeing to various tests and mostly just cooling our heels in a little curtained room where I read the sports section four or five times. In the end, we were told it was just muscle spasms. We headed home much relieved; but to tell the truth, I had never been too worried from the start. This was rather astonishing for me, considering my family's penchant for excessive worrying, which can be traced back to at least the Civil War and blamed for more than one nervous breakdown. How to explain this uncharacteristic calm? The credit went not to modern anti-anxiety medication but to a lowly cook from a 17th-century monastery.

It had been about a year since I'd stumbled upon *The Practice of the Presence of God*, the classic collection of letters and teachings by Brother Lawrence, who spent his life chopping vegetables in a kitchen in France and thanking God for it anyway. I read his little book in a weekend, and it quickly became a companion nearly as constant as my cellphone. It taught me two points I had failed to learn from St. Augustine, Pascal, Thomas Merton and a raft of other great spiritual figures to whom I had turned over the years—that prayer is our greatest vocation and that the surest way to God is in our current circumstances, however pedestrian they might seem.

As I raked leaves, collected the trash and slogged through dozens of other humdrum tasks that for years had seemed merely a waste of time, I could hear Brother Lawrence urging me to find new meaning in each one. "Lord of all pots and pans and things," he prayed, "make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!" His teachings inspire. They are also demanding and unsettling, because they are about letting go. "We ought to give ourselves up to God," Brother Lawrence taught, "with regard both to things temporal and spiritual, and seek our satisfaction only

ART BY DAN SALAMIDA

STEPHEN MARTIN has written for Commonweal and U.S. News & World Report. He lives in Greensboro, N.C.

in the fulfilling of His will, whether He lead us by suffering or by consolation."

On this particular Sunday morning visit to the E.R., God led us by inconvenience, but I did not object. It was a unique victory for me, and I couldn't resist congratulating myself. Out on my deck that afternoon, flanked by quiet woods in bright sunshine, I captured this triumph in a journal entry. As that hectic morning unfolded, I wrote, "I found myself almost naturally resorting to prayer instead of freaking out or getting anxious, and that's an improvement for me.… It was also a chance to practice dealing with situations as they arise and having the flexibility to stay calm." Then I took my notebook back inside the house, changed into shorts and a sweatshirt and headed out for my cell-phone-free run.

"Make it your study, before taking up any task," Brother Lawrence advises, "to look to God, be it only for a moment." I have this nugget of wisdom underlined in his book in black ink, but it was well out of my mind by the time I stalked into our living room to confront the offending bird. Small, dark and sparrow-like, it was hopping around the grate inside our fireplace, chirping unhappily behind the glass doors. As I fumed at our bad luck, my plucky wife grabbed a large towel and reached for the fireplace doors.

"What are you doing?" I roared.

"I'm going to get it out," she said.

"I don't think that's a smart move when you're pregnant," I snapped.

"Oh, please," she said. "Since I got pregnant, you won't let me do anything." That was true and hardly worth disputing.

"Just let me have the towel," I said.

As I gingerly opened the glass doors, I knew I had a better chance of delivering our baby myself than catching a furious bird in a towel, transporting it to the front door and setting it free without getting an eye pecked out. The bird wasn't up for it either. No sooner had I cracked the doors open than it jumped onto the hearth and took off.

I don't recall the exact pattern of its flight, but it covered a lot of airspace in our living and dining rooms as I stood rooted to the hardwood floor holding an empty beach towel and swearing earnestly. We should "so rule all our actions that they be little acts of communion with God," said Brother Lawrence. It was too late for that.

After a couple of desperate loops, the bird smashed into our dining room window and dropped to the floor. It lay there dazed for a moment, long enough for me to stop feeling sorry for myself. I yanked open the front door, propped the screen open and dashed back to the dining room.

The determined bird was airborne again, and I was ready for redemption, ready to defend my vulnerable, helpless, pregnant wife, who in the interim had wisely closed all the doors leading to the rest of our house and thus saved the day. The bird had perched along the wall—and was still a step ahead of me. With a burst of beating wings, it rocketed straight through the dining room at chest level, across the living room and right out the front door in a smooth ascending arc skyward, zipping beneath the upper left corner of the door frame and into the open air like a football just squeezing through the uprights. Any illusions I had about my progress with prayer and patience flew out the door with it.

In explaining to a colleague how he prayed, Brother Lawrence wrote, "Everyone is capable of such familiar conversation with God, some more, some less. He knows what we can do. Let us begin, then." It is in this beginning, of course, that reality, the reality of our wandering minds, collides with our spiritual ambitions, and our failures pile up high in the wreckage. It is hard to keep the conversation with God going. We forget about grace as we sweep floors and sit in traffic and stagger around a dark room in the middle of the night hunting for lost pacifiers; then we remember, and then we forget again.

Looking back on his journey of prayer, Brother Lawrence observes that it was replete with shortcomings, that he "fell often, and rose again presently." Faith, he reminds us, is less about moments of mystical union and mostly about getting knocked down and standing back up—like the bird in my house as it bounced off the window, hit the floor and took flight again, like my own restless faith straining to break free of the limits I impose, searching for that open door, for that sudden flash of warming sky and the promise of springtime coming. A

Words That Make Music

BY JAMES S. TORRENS

THE FOLEY POETRY contest approaches, with entries accepted between Jan. 1 and March 31. I know how the outpouring of poems will eventually seem like what Robert Frost describes in "After Apple Picking"—"the rumbling sound of load on load of apples coming in." (The picker admits he is "overtired of the great harvest I myself desired.")

What do I want to say now to improve the harvest? Mostly I want to observe, in the face of relaxed habits, that a decent paragraph of prose is not necessarily a poem. Typography can spread out a text attractively on the page, but that doesn't necessarily make it a poem. Besides pleasing visually, the poem should please the ear. Its intelligent design has to include, above all, a discernible music, some evident or subtle way that the words, phrases and lines are knit together for the ear.

This concern for regularities of sound does not rule out flashes of imagination, eloquence, wit and insight, which are the life blood of poems. But it is a reminder of the ear's love of pattern, and that poetic artistry lies in elements, small or large, that repeat. In the older English verse, poetic form meant metrics—a controlled alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables—and, except for blank verse, rhyme. Even now, songs, hymns, blues couplets and nursery rhymes hew closely to these standards. But for many writers today the fixed forms, like the rhymed quatrain, which Emily Dickinson managed so brilliantly, have become a straitjacket.

There are many alternatives for patterning sound. Consider the psalms. No one who prays the psalms will claim that they rhyme, but in a larger sense they do, strictly. Each line is immediately matched by another of equal length, which says the same thing in other words, or develops the statement, as in this verse of Psalm 107: "God changed rivers into desert, / springs of water into thirsty ground." Shifts of thought and alterations of mood are needed to prevent monotony, but the pattern governs strongly. Also a number of psalms have repeated segments, i.e., refrains (e.g., Psalms 42, 43, 46, 67, 80), which function as echoes. Echoing is a great resource for poetry and song, as it is for rhetoric.

In modern poetry skill lies above all in management of the line. The ear has to be good at tying together sounds within the line, whether by alliteration or assonance (similar vowel sound) or by keeping a key word at the end of the line, which is the most emphatic place. In unrhymed poetry, the slight pause to dwell at the end of a line is a key to maintaining rhythm.

Somber though it is, the poem "Driving Home" by Charles Simic, (The New Yorker, 8/13), is a classic of intelligent design. Here is the first of two stanzas:

> Minister of our coming doom,
> preaching
> On the car radio, how right
> Your Hell and damnation sound
> to me
> As I travel these small, bleak roads
> Thinking of the mailman's son
> The Army sent back in a sealed
> coffin.

ART BY SHUTTERSTOCK/STEFANIE ANGELE

JAMES S. TORRENS, S.J., is poetry editor of **America**.

Poetry Contest

Poems are being accepted for the 2008 Foley Poetry Award

Each entrant is asked to submit only one typed, unpublished poem of 30 lines or fewer that is not under consideration elsewhere. Include contact information on the same page as the poem. Poems will not be returned. Please do not submit poems by e-mail or fax. Submissions must be postmarked between Jan. 1 and March 31.

Poems received outside the designated period will be treated as regular poetry submissions, and are not eligible for the prize.

The winning poem will be published in the June 9-16 issue of America.
Three runner-up poems will be published in subsequent issues.

Cash prize: $1,000.

Send poems to: Foley Poetry Contest
America, 106 West 56th Street, New York, NY 10019

Much of what that poem means lies in how it sounds. The second stanza matches the first in number of lines and their length. The endings of the lines are strong, and certain phrases stick in the ear.

It is possible to write more fluidly than Charles Simic chooses to do here. Consider this segment from "A Village Life," by Louise Glück (The New Yorker, 8/13), where the length of lines and stanzas keeps changing: "In the window, the moon is hanging over the earth,/ meaningless but full of messages...burning like a star, and convincingly, so that you feel sometimes/ it could actually make something grow on earth."

These lines are definite, strong. Their start-stop is effective. A very long line is always perilous, but the poet manages it. The music here is subtle but unmistakable.

Charles Simic and Louise Glück are just two paradigms that modern poetry offers. The accomplished poet eventually finds his or her own voice, but it has to have music in it. No jays or crows, please. No cuckoos either. Robins and meadowlarks, yes. A

It's Confusing Out There

A Faith That Frees

Catholic Matters for the 21st Century

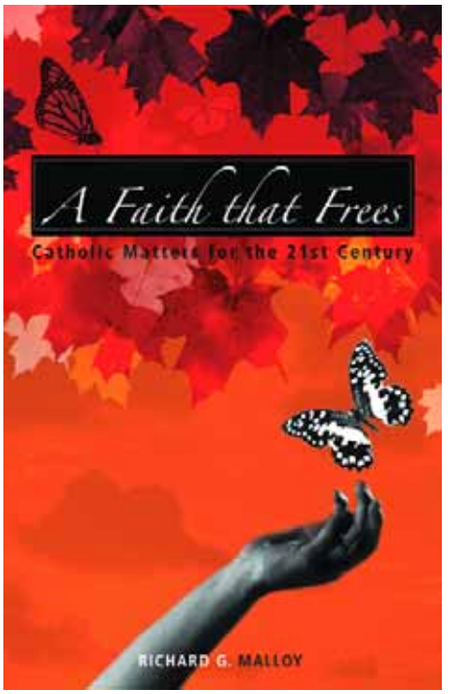
By Richard G. Malloy, S.J.

Orbis Books. 232p $18
ISBN 9781570757341

Over the past five decades, liberation theologians have stressed the notion of Christian practice or praxis (Greek for "doing"), that is, the notion that being a disciple of Jesus Christ requires action that is congruent with the Gospel, discloses its truth and transforms society. According to Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P., Jon Sobrino, S.J., and others, Christians should adopt personal and communal forms of life that manifest and promote the coming of God's kingdom, thereby challenging unjust social, political and economic structures. Orthodoxy (Greek for "right belief") should show itself in orthopraxis (Greek for "right conduct").

In *A Faith That Frees*, Richard G. Malloy, S.J., who teaches anthropology and sociology at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, conveys his vision of Catholic orthopraxis in North America at the start of the 21st century. On the one hand, using the methods, ideas and information of cultural anthropology and sociology, he analyzes aspects of American Catholicism. On the other hand, drawing on theology as well as the pastoral letters of the Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, he makes concrete proposals concerning the ways in which North American Catholics should live and act so that they mature in their Christian faith and simultaneously witness to the Gospel. In his words:

> This book privileges not theological truths to be disseminated but rather practices and experiences, conversations and dialogues, hoping that the authentic living of our faith, a full and flexible Catholicism, will transform us by persuasion and example, rather than by the hammering home of seemingly self-evident, monological truths.



In the book's first part (Chapters 1 to 3), Malloy gives his "theory of Catholicism." Working with the ideas of Bernard Lonergan, S.J., he explains that "authentic Catholicism" involves ongoing conversion, "the transformation of one's self over a lifetime into a person incorporated into the reality of God, the promise made to us all that we may 'become participants in the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4)" (p. 19). This spiritual process includes, he contends, a critical consciousness of "the cultural components that affect our practice of Catholicism." Moving from what Lonergan called "a classicist notion of culture" to "an empirical notion of culture," Catholics should express their Christian belief in specific practices or actions that confront and seek to change the shortcomings of our society and culture while also affirming legitimate American values. In other words, the followers of Jesus Christ should "discern how the social structures, cultural values, and meanings of our society and age measure up against the gospel message of life and liberty, truth and love, freedom and hope."

In the book's second part (Chapters 4 to 8), Malloy highlights "prophetic practices of Catholicism that lead to conversion and transformation in various social and cultural venues." Concerning today's globalization, for example, he observes in Chapter 7 that the world's population doubled from 1955 to 1995, going from 2.5 billion to 5 billion, and that by 2035 it will be 9 billion people. This rapid increase has affected the Catholic Church. Today there are approximately 1.1 billion Catholics. Of these, 520 million are in Latin America. In Africa, the number of Catholics has grown from 1.9 million in 1900 to 130 million in 2000. During this same period, the number of Catholics in Asia grew from 11 million to 107 million. Not surprisingly, as Catholics in Africa, Asia and Latin America view the Gospel and the Christian tradition in relation to their respective cultures, they will increasingly "transform and transmit life in Christ in ways as yet unforeseen and unpredictable."

In light of this new global reality, Malloy argues that North American Catholics should accept today's world church with its new forms of prayer, worship and Christian life. Also, they should work for the well-being of the world's poor and for the overcoming of de-humanizing capitalism. In short, Catholics should practice "a cross-cultural, global Christianity."

Based on his sociological and anthropological analyses of further dimensions of American life, Malloy proposes other forms of orthopraxis. Catholics should adopt "the practice of just gender and race relations," "the practice of economic social justice," "the practice of sane, sensual, responsible and relational sexu-

The Reviewers

Robert A. Krieg is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, Ind.

Ann Rodgers is a religion reporter with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

John F. Kavanaugh, S.J., teaches medical ethics at St. Louis University, Mo. His most recent book is *Who Count As Persons?* (Georgetown Univ. Press, 2002).

ality" and "cultural practices that foster and admire peace and peacemakers." Also, church leaders should engage in "the loving exercise of power and authority."

A Faith That Frees stands in the theological tradition of the Second Vatican Council's outreach to the world. Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" brings the truths of Christian belief "into dialogue with" the world about its "various problems, throwing the light of the Gospel on them and supplying humanity with the saving resources which the Church has received from its founder under the promptings of the Holy Spirit" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 3). Similarly, Malloy's book answers "the questions with which we struggle as we strive to live as Catholics in today's increasingly globalized world."

A Faith That Frees is a challenging book. It introduces readers to sociological data, concepts in cultural anthropology and theological notions concerning Christian praxis, conversion and the church's mission. Anecdotes from Malloy's pastoral ministries in the inner city and in Latin America illuminate this rich material. Further, the text moves between social-science analyses of specific situations in North America and theological statements about the ways in which Catholics should act in these situations in order to witness to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. This frequent back-and-forth movement requires readers' concentration and also a readiness to pause and reflect on our actual ways of expressing the Christian faith. Given this emphasis on Catholic practices in the "first world," *A Faith That Frees* contributes to the growing literature in liberation theology for North America.

Robert A. Krieg

Miracles and Mystery

Lourdes

Font of Faith, Hope, and Charity

By Elizabeth Ficocelli

Paulist Press. 181p $16.95
(paperback; with photos)
ISBN 9780809144860

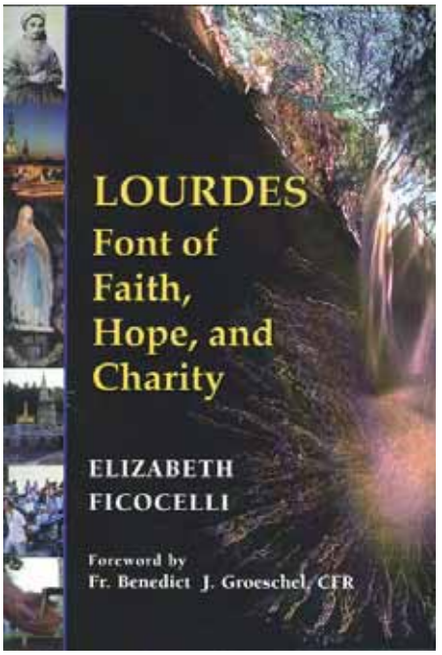
This coming February marks the 150th anniversary of the apparitions at Lourdes, France, where a desperately poor, illiterate teenage girl had 18 visions of a woman in white who identified herself as "the Immaculate Conception."

Since then millions from around the world have flocked to the waters of a spring that the mysterious woman revealed to 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous. Thousands have claimed miraculous healing there. Six million people each year visit the shrine in the Pyrenees, with 500,000 standing for hours in line to use one of its baths.

Lourdes: Font of Faith, Hope, and Charity is a pilgrim's guide to the shrine, in which Elizabeth Ficocelli, whose previous books include *The Fruits of Medjugorje*, brings readers up to date on its continually unfolding story. She says upfront that in her research she struggled to balance her dual roles as journalist and pilgrim, and that it was never her intention to produce a skeptical inquiry into the apparitions or claims of the miraculous.

The result is a refreshing and sometimes fascinating account from a writer who is at once orthodox and steeped in the

teachings of the Second Vatican Council, about a shrine that is as oriented to the future as to commemoration of the past. Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R., a priest and psychologist whose spiritual writings are especially popular among conservative Catholics, has written the book's foreword and attributes his own recent recovery from serious injuries received in a car crash to the intercession of St. Bernadette and the Virgin of Lourdes.



The most compelling chapters deal with contemporary ministry at the shrine, especially the work of the volunteers interviewed by the author, who do their utmost to make a pilgrimage to Lourdes an encounter with Christ. Although Ficocelli writes at length about medical cures attributed to Lourdes, her primary emphasis throughout is on Lourdes as a place of spiritual healing.

The water of Lourdes is a sign of a greater water: the water of baptism. To wash recalls the sacrament of baptism, in which our sins are washed away and we become children of God. It is because of our need to be reborn, forgiven, purified and reconciled that we come to this water. The water of Lourdes should not, however, be confused with holy water. It is the faith of the people that makes it special.

Though in general *Lourdes* is a strong narrative, there are several passages that seem to have been edited with an ax for reasons of space. When the grown-up Bernadette joined the Sisters of Charity of Nevers, Ficocelli tells us that she had a troubled relationship with some of her superiors, and offers several reasons why this might have been so. But she never describes what characterized the bad relationship. This gap later widens when one of her order's superiors was so opposed to Bernadette's canonization that the cause was not opened until after that superior's death. Why did the superior feel so strongly? How had she treated Bernadette? Perhaps those unanswered questions will inspire some readers to dig further into St. Bernadette's life.

The final chapters cover the relationship of Pope John Paul II to the Lourdes shrine (he visited in August 1983—the first "papal pilgrim") and describe the shrine's outreach to youth, emphasizing peacemaking and interreligious dialogue alongside its ministry of healing the sick. Those whose mental images of Lourdes are bound up in pre-Vatican II spirituality may be surprised and challenged by its orientation not only toward the present but the future of the church as well.

Especially interesting is Ficocelli's description of the behind-the-scenes work carried on by 8,000 trained volunteers from throughout the world. These volunteers meet handicapped pilgrims at the train station and airport, and escort them to an *accueil*, which is a sort of hybrid hotel-hospital. One *accueil* alone has 900 beds, with medical equipment and the ability to cater to special diets.

The book's shortcoming—even though, admittedly, it is a "pilgrim's guide"—is its lack of some basic travel-related information. The author explains how to gain spiritual benefit from a visit to Lourdes and cites the most popular times of pilgrimage as well as the hours of the baths, but not how to arrange a stay at an *accueil*. Tucked in at the end of the bibliography is a list of Web sites, some of which would no doubt give that information. But a summary by Ficocelli of what each Web site offers would have been helpful. The Web address of the shrine's official site, www.lourdes-france.org, is buried beneath those of the 1914 Catholic Encyclopedia, Catholic News Service and two conservative Catholic news and opinion forums.

But those are quibbles. *Lourdes* is a fine book for the person of faith and even the casual visitor to Lourdes—anyone who seeks to understand better its important place in history and its meaning for today. In the words of Bishop Jacques Perrier of Tarbes and Lourdes: "Lourdes is not a museum. Its function is to bring alive the message and to proclaim it to the men and women of the twenty-first century…. [That] message, the message of the Gospel, offers a path of happiness to everyone now and for the future."

Ann Rodgers

I Think, Therefore...

The Spiritual Brain

A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul

By Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary
Harper One. 384p $25.95 (hardcover)
ISBN 9780060858834

In *Lost in the Cosmos*, Walker Percy recounts an incident when the great neuroscientist Sir John Eccles was greeted by boos and hisses at a Harvard lecture. Eccles had committed the unpardonable sin of claiming that human self-consciousness was not reducible to the biochemistry of the brain. The hostile reception was child of a dogmatic tradition called materialism: "How can that be? If the self is not reducible to material causes, it cannot exist." Eccles's response, whenever he was greeted with such rants, usually took the form, "If self-consciousness exists, it exists. And if you can't explain it by materialist categories, then your materialism is inadequate."

In subsequent years, materialists employed one of two tactics. They either denied that the self exists, thereby causing considerable problems for anyone who might hold that humans are capable of freedom and even rational inquiry; or they offered what Karl Popper derided as a "promissory materialism," a sheer act of faith that someday, somehow, self-consciousness will be explained away as the firing of neurons.

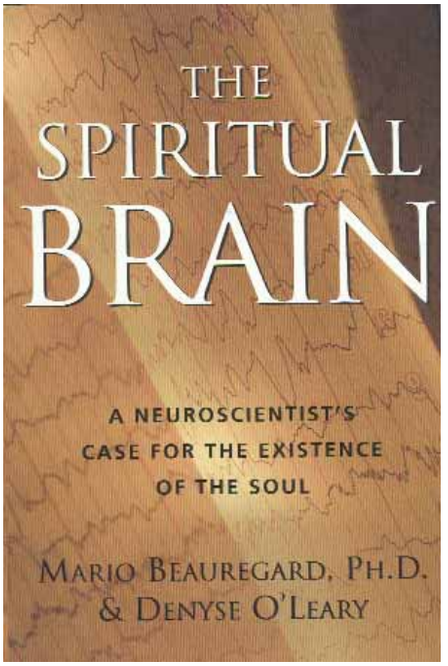
Mario Beauregard, a neuroscientist at the University of Montreal, collaborating with the Toronto-based journalist Denyse O'Leary, has written *The Spiritual Brain* to show how the promissory note of materialism will never pay off. Using his own functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) research on the brain, he first mounts an evidence-based critique of materialist brainism and then offers reasons why materialist accounts will never work.

The fact that most humans report religious, spiritual and mystical experiences has sent some materialists on a scavenger hunt for a "God-spot" in the brain, a "God-gene" hiding in some chromosome and even a "God helmet" that stirs up an electromagnetic field to give the brain a spiritual buzz. Beauregard's fMRI work shows that, while all human cognitive experience is accompanied by firings in the neural network, the experiences themselves are utterly unlocalizable.

The workings of the brain accompany spiritual experience but do not fully account for it. What is more, although human experience requires the brain as a necessary condition for our embodied personal acts of self-consciousness, mindfulness, freedom and love, the brain cannot adequately explain them. Beauregard examines cases of the paranormal, the placebo effect and therapeutic auto-suggestion, all under fMRI conditions, to show that the brain-driven content of our experience is different from our self-directed consciousness of the content. Most remarkable here is the report of a near-death-experience of someone clinically dead, with a flat EEG but nonetheless aware.

In a chapter recounting a fascinating neural study of Carmelite nuns reliving and recalling deep mystical states in

prayer, *The Spiritual Brain* concludes that, while neural science cannot disprove or prove the existence of God, it can rule out the inadequate explanations that materialism applies to religious, spiritual and mystical experiences. The authors suggest, moreover, that an open and honest engagement of the data could lead to the conclusion that "mind and consciousness represent a fundamental and irreducible property of the Ground of Being." I use the words "suggest" and "could" in the last sentence because materialists might be willing to present data in rebuttal.



This book is to be praised for the questions it raises. One might hope that some materialists would greet it not with hissing, but with a thoughtful, evidence-based counterargument. It will be appreciated by scientists, health-care professionals, theologians and philosophers, although for the schooled scientist it may not be technical enough, while for the layperson it may be too technical at times. A similar mixed reaction might be made to the authors' frequent use of side information boxes and the sprinkling of unanchored quotations. Some will find the practice irritating, others a benefit.

The Spiritual Brain deserves to be carefully evaluated for the claims it makes and the philosophy on which it seems to rest. While I think it is a must-read for anyone interested in neuroscience, I also think it could use some distinctions. Even the title and subtitle raise a host of problems to the secular (and religious) mind. To my thinking, the brain is not spiritual. The brain is matter. But to understand this, we have to discuss what we mean by mind, brain and spirit.

The subtitle is also problematic: "A neuroscientist's case for the existence of the soul." The term "soul" itself has many problems beyond the fact that it is often a source of political and scientific contention. For some it is a religious concept, pertaining only to what is called the human soul. But in its history the notion of soul is a philosophical one. It is not dependent on any religious belief. The most historically grounded notion of the soul is found in Aristotle (and other traditions). Soul refers not to some spiritual or religious reality; it refers only to the fact that something is alive. Thus, for Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, animals and even plants have a soul, understood as any organism's dynamic organizing principle of self-development and elaboration.

It may thus be appropriate to speak of the soul, even the "mind" of a non-human animal. The crucial issue is what kind of soul, what kind of mind, humans have. Then, does such a soul require us to affirm that there is something special about the human soul and its destiny?

Beauregard is not a "substance dualist" like Descartes, yet he offers evidence to argue that the human person has endowments not reducible to matter. The human "mind," then, is not some independent being attached to our bodies. That would mean we are two substances, but we are not. As Beauregard himself insists in an upcoming article for the journal Progress in Neurobiology (reported on the co-authors' Weblog), "We must keep in mind that the whole human person, not merely a part of a brain, thinks, feels, or believes." Amen to that.

John F. Kavanaugh

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Letters

Fatal Love

In the Signs of the Times story about Franz Jägerstätter (11/12), the author writes, "Blessed Jägerstätter was beatified as a martyr, which means he was killed out of hatred for the faith." In other words, someone's hate got Franz into heaven. But such is decidedly not the case. It is in fact the martyr who acts by not complying with a demand made by another, because that very demand goes against the faith. And out of love of the faith, the saint accepts the inevitable, fatal results. Hence a better definition would be: "he was beatified as a martyr, which means he was killed because of his love for the faith."

Paul Veale
Hanover, N.H.

Guidance, Not Edicts

Regarding "Bishops on Citizenship," by Matt Malone, S.J., and the following "Commentary" by Frank Monahan (11/5): I'm glad the bishops plan to take up the issues of the primacy of and formation of conscience. We need guidance and clarity, not just edicts and orders.

Too many Catholics among my friends and family hung their recent votes almost solely on the candidates' reported position on the abortion issue. Myopia, many of us would say. Are not there other issues that cry for attention in legislative and executive offices? It seems the bishops have a robust set of challenges with which to deal.

In the minds of many educated, conscientious and politically aware Catholics their reputations are on the line.

Robert Hanson
Rancho Murieta, Calif.

Feed the Sheep

As a conservative, I was heartened by the Rev. Michael Kerper's "My Second First Mass" (12/3). It was nice to read about a "progressive" pastor who took the time and made the effort to meet the requests of the traditionalists in his parish.

Certainly it will benefit the entire church if more liberal priests follow the lead of this good shepherd and begin to celebrate the Latin liturgy with reverence and regularity.

George Koenig
St. Francis, Wis.

The Body of Christ

My first thought on the Rev. Michael Kerper's "My Second First Mass" (12/3) is that I wish I had his pastoral sensitivity. The self-questioning he endured between his first refusal and ultimate agreement to meet the needs of sincere parishioners was both humbling and edifying. I only hope that his example will inspire others to emulate his style of service.

I had another feeling of a vague disquiet as I thought back to his description of a sense of tranquility and reverence as he could face the altar and the elements on it in solitude, his back turned to the congregation.

It is no accident that for the fathers of the church, Eucharist had a meaning different from the later understanding of making Christ really present and the worship of that miraculous presence. The core meaning of Eucharist, from the Gospels, Pauline epistles and fathers of the church is that of the celebrant and people becoming all together the very body of Christ. The focus was not primarily on the real presence but on the people's entering into the mysteries, the acts, the events of Christ's dying and rising—an emphasis not on a static presence of Christ but on acts of Christ that are everlasting and capable of sweeping us into them.

The subsequent development of eucharistic understanding as the real presence has proved undoubtedly helpful for millions of Catholics over the centuries. At the same time, I believe the more original and core meaning of the Eucharist as entry into the saving events of Christ as the body of Christ must not be eclipsed by the later developments. It is the Eucharist that binds this congregation to one another and reminds us powerfully that our salvation through Christ is never a solitary act but one that is accomplished only within a saving community of people.

Bob Livingston
Berkley, Mich.

America (ISSN 0002-7049) is published weekly (except for 11 combined issues: Jan. 1-8, 15-22, April 16-23, June 4-11, 18-25, July 2-9, 16-23, July 30-Aug. 6, Aug. 13-20, Aug. 27-Sept. 3, Dec. 24-31) by America Press, Inc., 106 West 56th Street, New York, NY 10019. Periodicals postage is paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices. Business Manager: Lisa Pope; Circulation: Judith Urena, (212) 581-4640. Subscriptions: United States, $48 per year; add U.S. $22 postage and GST (#131870719) for Canada; or add U.S. $32 per year for overseas surface postage. For overseas airmail delivery, please call for rates. Postmaster: Send address changes to America, 106 West 56th St. New York, NY 10019. Printed in the U.S.A.

The Word

Family Values

Holy Family, Dec. 30, 2007

Readings: Sir 3:2-7, 12-14; Ps 128:1-5; Col 3:12-21; Mt 2:13-15, 19-23

"My son, take care of your father when he is old" (Sir 3:12)

ART BY TAD DUNNE

ON CHRISTMAS DAY we celebrated the birth of Jesus the Word of God as a human being. He entered our world as part of a family, so it has become customary to focus on the Holy Family on the Sunday after Christmas.

That there is a crisis in the modern family is hardly news. One positive and constructive way of approaching the crisis is to look at it in light of today's Scripture readings. They treat three topics of great contemporary interest: the responsibility adult children have to care for their aging parents, the responsibility parents have to provide for their young children and the values and virtues that should animate family life today.

One of the Ten Commandments, "Honor your father and your mother," is primarily addressed to adults with regard to their own parents. The reading from the book of Sirach is an extended reflection on that commandment and provides good reasons for observing it. It is no secret that Americans today are living longer than ever before, in large part because of new medicines and better medical care. But great scientific advances often bring with them their own problems. Now we find that many middle-aged adults face a double set of often burdensome responsibilities: to both young children and aging parents.

DANIEL J. HARRINGTON, S.J., is professor of New Testament at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass.

Praying With Scripture

- What aspects of family life are most enriching for you? What aspects are most challenging?
- How do you understand the commandment to honor your father and mother?
- What family values do you try to hand on to the next generation?

Today's passage from Matthew 2 places before us Joseph as a model of a caring and watchful parent. The Matthean account of Jesus' infancy features much fear and suffering as well as some very dangerous traveling. To escape King Herod, the Holy Family flees from Bethlehem to Egypt and eventually returns not to Bethlehem but rather to Nazareth in Galilee. Today hardly a day goes by without a report of adults being arrested for abusing or even killing children. These are dangerous times for children, and being a caring and watchful parent has become increasingly challenging. Joseph and Mary are models for parents of all ages of fidelity and concern for the safety and welfare of their child.

The instruction to wives to be subordinate to their husbands in Colossians 3 captures the attention of most people today. It is not as bad as it may sound and can be explained historically and theologically. It may, however, distract from the

Candidate Index Details

(From page 4.) Unless otherwise noted, information is from surveys filled out by the candidates, at www.vote-smart.gov.

• Total Number of Candidate Marriages: Giuliani and Kucinich have each been divorced twice, married three times; Gravel, Dodd, McCain and Thompson have each been divorced once, married twice; Biden is a widower and remarried.

• Candidates who are Catholic: Biden, Dodd, Giuliani, Kucinich, Richardson. Candidates who used to be Catholic: Gravel (now Unitarian), Tancredo (now Presbyterian).

• Candidates who have had Catholic or Jesuit Education: Biden attended the Norbertine Archmere Academy in Claymont, Del.; Giuliani went to Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School in Brooklyn and Manhattan College in Riverdale, N.Y.; Tancredo went to Holy Family High School, Denver; Gravel went to Assumption College Prep in Worcester, Mass., and has a sister who is a nun; Kucinich attended St. John Cantius, Cleveland; Dodd attended Jesuit-run Georgetown Prep in Washington, D.C., and Providence College in Rhode Island.

• Candidates who are Catholic or Formerly Catholic or Catholic Educated and are Pro-Life: Only Tancredo, a former Catholic, votes Pro-Life on Abortion.

• Candidates with Pets: Biden has a cat; Richardson has a horse; Gravel has a dog; Kucinich has three dogs. Clinton has a chocolate lab; Edwards has 2 dogs (1 golden retriever, 1 chocolate lab); Huckabee has 2 dogs (1 chocolate lab); and Hunter has 2 dogs. Both are chocolate labs.

• Most Pets: John McCain currently has 22 pets—1 cat, 3 birds, 13 fish, 2 turtles, a ferret and 2 dogs (no labs).

• Favorite Food—fresh fruit and vegetables: Kucinich; red meat: Giuliani's favorite foods are hamburgers or steaks

whole passage with its list of the values and virtues that should be learned in the context of Christian family life: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace and gratitude. These are the family values that parents today should cultivate, exemplify and hand on to the next generation. No legacy is more important to pass on than these family values and virtues lived out "in the Lord." (For my comments on the readings for the Solemnity of Mary, Jan. 1, see **America,** 12/19/06.)

Not Just Exotic Visitors

Epiphany (A), Jan. 6, 2008

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

"We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage" (Mt 2:2)

THE TERM "EPIPHANY" means a showing forth or manifestation. In the context of the Christmas season, it refers to the showing forth of the infant Jesus to a group known as the Magi. The story of the Epiphany in Matthew 2 describes how these exotic visitors from far away come in search of the newborn king of the Jews. The reigning king, Herod the Great, perceives this child to be a possible threat to his own power and tries to learn his exact location in order to kill him. With the aid of the Scriptures and by means of a mysterious star, the Magi find their way to Bethlehem, pay homage to the marvelous child and return home, thus thwarting Herod's evil designs.

The Epiphany story has fascinated people of all ages for many centuries. On the basis of the three gifts, a tradition arose that there were three Magi. Eventually the Magi became representatives of different peoples and races. Displays of the scene in our day attract great interest, but the Magi are more than exotic visitors. Beneath the biblical narrative and the many artistic representations of it lies an important theological theme: this Jewish child named Jesus has significance for all the peoples of the world. The Magi are clearly not Jews. Whether they were Persian priests or Babylonian astronomers or Nabataean spice traders, the basic point is that non-Jews come to the land of Israel to find and pay homage to the child Jesus. By way of reversal, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus will send forth his disciples to "all the nations."

Praying With Scripture

- What elements in the Epiphany story anticipate developments in Jesus' adult life?
- How might you describe the dynamic of biblical "universalism" as it appears in today's readings?
- What role does Jesus have in extending the identity of God's people?

Today's Old Testament readings have been chosen in part because they mention non-Jews bringing gifts in homage to the God of Israel. But they also develop the dynamic found in Matthew's Epiphany story. The passage from Isaiah 60 celebrates the divine light emanating from Jerusalem and foresees all the nations acknowledging and enjoying that light and walking by it. The excerpts from Psalm 72 look forward to the day when every nation will adore the God of Israel. Rooted in the historical particularity of ancient Israel, these texts hope for a time when the people of God will embrace all nations. As Ephesians 3 affirms, early Christians believed that through the particular historical figure of Jesus, membership in God's people has been extended and made available to all peoples. Through Jesus, Jews and Gentiles are now "coheirs, members of the same body and copartners in the promise."

Matthew's account of the Epiphany is very attractive. It features exotic visitors, a wicked king, court intrigue, a mysterious star, precious gifts and a newborn child. But its artistry may cause us to miss the presence of opposition to Jesus and suffering for himself and those around him from the start of his life on earth. Matthew's infancy narrative, in contrast to Luke's, is full of turmoil, danger and suffering. It reminds us that the Word became flesh amid the harsh political and social realities of human history.

Daniel J. Harrington

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from the grill; Huckabee's is steak; Hunter's, a hamburger and fries; Romney's, meat loaf; Tancredo favors Mexican food.

• Teachers: Biden has taught at the Widener College School of Law from 1991-present; Clinton taught at the University of Arkansas Law School in 1975; Richardson has taught at the University of New Mexico, New Mexico State University, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and the United World College; Kucinich was a professor of political science at Case Western University in Cleveland, Ohio, 1982-92 and Cleveland State University, 1991-94; Obama lectured in constitutional law at the University of Chicago from 1993-2004; before going into politics Tancredo was a teacher at Drake Junior High School in Arvada, Colo.

• Doctors: Paul (gynecologist).

• Lawyers: Biden, Clinton, Dodd, Edwards, Giuliani, Hunter, Obama, Romney, Thompson.

• Homeless: Kucinich, as a child. By the time he was 17, his family had moved 21 times—sometimes into their car. (The Boston Globe, 8/15).

• Bankrupt: Gravel, twice, most recently in 2004 (www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/05/07/mike_gravel).

• Pastor: Huckabee was the pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Pine Bluff, Ark. 1980-86, and the Beech Street First Baptist Church in Texarkana from 1986 to 1992.

• Bishop: Romney.

• Mayor: Kucinich was mayor of Cleveland, 1977-79; Giuliani was mayor of New York City, 1994-2001.

• Governor: Huckabee was governor of Arkansas, 1996-2007; Richardson has been the governor of New Mexico since 2002; Romney was governor of Massachusetts, 2002-6.

• Representative: Dodd (District 2, Conn., 1975-81), Hunter (District 52, Calif., 1980-present).