

NewEvangelists.org

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Forward

New Evangelists Monthly is an informal, dynamic, crowd-sourced “meta-magazine” showcasing the best posts faithful Catholic bloggers publish each month. Here you will find many different, but faithfully Catholic viewpoints, insights and perspectives.

Contributing authors submit their very best piece from the prior month between subsequent first and second Saturdays. Readers are welcome to visit anytime, even while contributions are still being accepted for a new issue. Back issues are available in the archive.

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Chanton Noel! [at Pauca Verba]

Here is a cyber Christmas gift for you today: the French Renaissance carol, *Chanton Noel*, sung by the Boston Camerata. A group of Long Island high school students translated the verses for us - particularly challenging as some of the words are a very old French no longer in use.

The photographs try to give some visual expression to the verses; a list below identifies each in some way. The last picture is timely. I imagine the evil one was pleased when the Coptic Christians had to flee the ISIS terror and wound up languishing far from home in the enormous refugee camp at Calais, France where they had no chapel for Christmas. But one spiritually sturdy and resourceful soul recycled sufficient material from the garbage and built the chapel we see here - which *weakened Satan's hand*. During the Christmastime we might listen to the joy-bearing carol again and even again, and contemplate the happy pictures.

I send a blessing for a Happy Christmas to you and all your family. And I thank you for allowing me entre to your lives through these posts this past year. *Christ is Born! Glorify him!*

- A Coptic (Egyptian) icon ~ The Visit of the Magi
- Buddhist Children Singing Christmas Carols
- Giotto: Shepherds and Angels
- Little Church in the Mountains of Tirol, Italy
- Cimabue ~ Virgin Mary and Child with Angels and St. Francis
- The Christmas Truce ~ 1941
- Spanish Nativity with Courteous Shepherds
- Holy Father, Pope Francis, Paying a Christmas Visit
- Rubens ~ Adoration of the Shepherds
- Refugee Camp ~ Calais, France ~ Coptic Church made of garbage

This contribution is available at <http://paucaverba.blogspot.com/2016/12/chanton-noel.html>
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Does Adventism teach a deficient Gospel? [at Catholicism and Adventism]

I've been thinking about something for a while. In the recent discussions with Adventists I've started to realise that Saturday observance, in the way modern sabbatarians teach it, is actually more than just a theological difference, more than just a minor error. It's a complete defect in the nature of the New Covenant. Most of Christianity teaches pretty much the same thing. Many Catholic-Protestant disagreements, in my opinion, are the two sides of the same coin arguing with each other about who is the coin. Or, in the Catholic view, Protestant theology simply lacks insight into a specific truth, or lacks completeness. Yes, there are real differences as well, but the two sides, when thinking rationally, can recognise each other as Christians. The Gospel is the same, the concept of the New Covenant with God is the same, the grasp of Christian morality is the same.



James and Ellen White

When it comes to Sabbatarianism, the authentic Christian relationship with God appears to be there, and for individuals it probably is, but the entire New Covenant they believe in is distorted and faulty. They take half of it, and discard the other half. The Epistle to the Hebrews is emptied of its meaning. They still want to cling to half the Old Covenant, and as a result, their theology is stuck half way between legal-minded Judaism and grace-filled Christianity. Just as Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses have a radically distorted concept of Jesus and the Father, so Sabbatarian theology has a radically distorted theology of the Christian relationship with God. And that's a serious thing to have a problem with.

After years of thinking of the Sabbatarian movement, especially the Adventist church, as mainstream Protestants with a quirk, I'm starting to think of them as a truly borderline Christian religion. Yes, there is the evangelical Adventist movement, and those who adhere to the pseudo-Evangelical Adventist document "*Questions on Doctrine*", and I'd put them in with Evangelical Protestantism, with a quirk, and perhaps a bit laboured with semi-Christian baggage. I do not consider Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses to be unsaved because of their theology, and with all the limitations their theology imposes, I believe they have a good relationship with God.

I'm starting to consider Adventism, in its mainstream form, as producing Christians in the same category as Jehovah's Witnesses. Perhaps this is the reason Adventism was initially classified as a cult by Walter Martin, who reversed his opinion when the Adventists showed their more evangelical Protestant side, a side [many Adventists reject to this day](#).

Deeper than just the sabbath

Dietary laws are another symptom of Adventism's lack of understanding of the New Covenant. In my posts on the dietary laws, I show that the distinction between clean and unclean meat was instituted as a sign of Israel's separation from the Gentiles. In the New Testament, it's revealed to Peter that the Gentiles are no longer to be excluded from God's people, and the symbolic distinction of clean vs unclean meat can be abandoned as it no longer serves any purpose. Paul tells us that we need not be judged by what we eat. Jesus himself declared all food purged of uncleanness.

By clinging to these dietary laws, Adventism seems to fail to grasp the full extent of the Gospel and the New Covenant. Or perhaps better stated, their defective understanding of the Gospel and New Covenant prevents them from discerning type from antitype, shadow from fulfilment. Their theology, in part, is still waiting for the Messiah to come.

Most Christians, past and present, have celebrated Jesus' birth, resurrection, baptism, and so forth with great joy. Having no holy days of our own instructed explicitly in the Bible, we celebrate Jesus' life. For many Adventists, that's too Catholic, and so they celebrate nothing. Having no holidays of their own instructed explicitly in the Bible, they are left with only Jesus, and can't bring themselves to celebrate him as the rest of us do. (Of course, they have the expectant sabbath we've got the conclusion to.)



Still life with Bible, Vincent van Gogh

Perhaps one of the more sinister indicators of their defective theology is their understanding of Jesus' nature. The rest of Christianity teaches that Jesus had Adam's initial unfallen nature, untainted by sin. Adventists teach that Jesus had a sinful human nature, and managed to resist temptation and live a sinless life, thus being more of an example by which we can save ourselves than a saviour.

He came not to our world to give the obedience of a lesser God to a greater, but as a man to obey God's holy law, and in this way He is our example. The Lord Jesus came to our world, not to reveal what a God could do, but what a man could do, through faith in God's power to help in every emergency.

Similarly, that man one day will stand before God without Jesus as a mediator is another sinister Adventist teaching. This could be any day now, with 1844 being the first date they assigned this event (after it failed as a prophecy of the return of Jesus on 22 October of that year.) According to Adventists, when Jesus died, the atonement was not complete (cf “It is finished” in John 19:30) but in 1844 he started a new phase of his ministry, which, when completed, would lead into the time when mankind had no mediator any longer. Eventually, according to them, the saved would be resurrected, and spend 1000 years checking the books of judgement in heaven, ensuring God got it right when he decided who was saved and who not.

Adventists:

1. Have their only celebration taken from the Old Covenant and ignore the joys of the New Covenant
2. Celebrate a day looking back to the exodus from Egypt instead of one celebrating our new life in Christ
3. Look back to the old creation and ignore the new
4. Retain the Old Covenant symbolism of the separation between Israel and the Gentiles
5. Have an Old Testament-style prophet who called them out of the rest of Christianity as a “remnant” group, similar to other movements of the time (Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example)
6. Believe Jesus had a sinful human nature, and is seen (perhaps like Islam) by many as more of an example than a saviour
7. Believe Jesus’ role as mediator will cease at an unknown future date
8. Are like Abraham’s wife Hagar, who represents the law given at Sinai (that they follow this law they acknowledge), instead of being like Sarah, who represents the New Covenant (Gal 4:21-31)

These are not necessarily the causes of their theological deficiency, but rather symptoms of something greater and more sinister and heterodox deeper within their theology that makes it significantly defective. I acknowledge that not all Adventists may share a faith this defective, and the Adventists who have led me to this conclusion may not represent the entire denomination. But that this problem exists is surely a sign that there are serious flaws, possibly to the extent of large parts of Adventism lying outside the fringe of normal mainstream Christian theology.

Further reading:

[What Precisely is the Gospel? ...](#) by Bishop Robert Barron

This contribution is available at <http://blog.theotokos.co.za/>
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The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil [at Renew The Church Blog]

Adam and Eve knew they were wrong to disobey God, but the temptation to eat the fruit was very strong. The evil one, the liar satan, told them what they wanted to hear and needed to hear, to quieten their conscience enough to will and to do the act of disobedience. The temptation was to be like God! He told them, “No, you will not die; you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

The forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a symbol of mortal spiritual danger both at the origins of human experience, and in our current realities in the world today. Knowing good and evil was no arbitrary test for Adam and Eve. No, it would not have just as well been any other test of obedience, such as “Never go into that one little house on the other side of the Garden,” or, “Never eat of that bush with the little red berries.” This test was specific: Never eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

What could be wrong with having such knowledge? Today it might seem to us that we need to have knowledge about what is good and what is evil! Is not a major problem we have today, in a modern “post-Christian” world, that we have no clear understanding of right and wrong, of good and evil? Isn’t a loss of Judea-Christian moral principles – replaced by amoral “political correctness” – a grave threat to our culture and society and nation? The Ten Commandments are hardly even suggestions anymore: indeed, they may as well have been written in pencil with eraser attached – forget the stone tablets – so flexible and adaptable they have become.

But no, this one forbidden tree in the midst of the Garden was of great and mythic significance. It carried within itself a test, a temptation, for human persons in every age and generation from the first to the last. The Catechism helps us to understand the importance of this test – and the dangers it presented and presents:

God created man in his image and established him in his friendship. A spiritual creature, man can live this friendship only in free submission to God. The prohibition against eating “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” spells this out: “for in the day that you eat of it, you shall die.” The “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:17) symbolically evokes the insurmountable limits that man, being a creature, must freely recognize and respect with trust. Man is dependent on his Creator, and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom. (Catechism of the Catholic Church #396)

This test, in other words, reaches to man’s very center of self-understanding: am I a mere creature under subjection to a Creator? I am drawn toward God; I am called into personal communion with God! I am made in His image and likeness! Does this mean I am a God too – that I should be my own God, a God unto myself? The evil one knew how to tempt Eve: “No, you will not die; you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

The evil one covered and obscured the truth at stake in the decision set before mankind. “Knowing good and evil” is much more than knowing about good and evil – it is much more than knowing merely how to discern good from evil. The Catechism described well the root of this tree: “The tree of the knowledge of

good and evil symbolically evokes the insurmountable limits that man, being a creature, must freely recognize and respect with trust. Man is dependent on his Creator, and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom.” The temptation was and is this fundamental. Man is man, not God.

The temptation can be more easily understood if we consider carefully this tree and its fruit. The “knowledge” offered was to know good and to know evil as only God can, in His complete union with goodness, and His complete otherness and separateness from evil. This meaning of the temptation can be seen in comparing other uses in Holy Scripture of the verb “to know” when used to describe the intimate, personal, interior union – meant in verses such as:

- Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived... (Gen 4:1, RSV)
- [Then Mary said,] How shall this be, since I know not a man? (Lk 1:34, KJV)
- I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. (Jn 10:14-15, RSV)
- He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. (1Jn 4:8, RSV)

And so on. To know good – in the sense intended in the forbidden fruit – would be to be God, who alone is one with goodness itself, who alone is in perfect union with goodness. To “know” in this sense is to possess the reality in one’s own nature, intrinsically and essentially. It is not merely to “know about” as all men are called to do, and to grow in such understanding as creatures of the all-good God ought to do. Jesus in a sense made this distinction when He corrected a man judging goodness carelessly:

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. (Mk 10:17-18)

Thus the temptation, to eat of this tree, is to be one’s own God – a God to oneself, free to define good and evil at will. This temptation is as powerful and deadly today as it was in the Garden of Eden! This is the horror of our times: men want to define good and evil, right and wrong on their own terms, as they choose. And their choices always go from bad to worse, as they grow in arrogance and in distance from truth, and from the one true God.

We see the path of descent toward evil today, in our post-Christian society. Now men define evil as good, and good as evil! Now men make it legal to kill the innocent unborn, and call it a “right”. Now men define their own genders as they please, and marry whatever they please, and un-marry whenever they please. Now they rob the innocent of all modesty, invading bathrooms and shower rooms and changing rooms as they please. Now men are stripped of masculinity and women of femininity, and they call it “equality.” Now all are stripped of human dignity, and they call it “liberation.” Now the children are robbed of responsible fathers, and of nurturing mothers, and they call it freedom from stereotypes. The children grow up without parents, and we discover a nation with no grownups.

The fruit of sin is death, America. Men who define good and evil for themselves, are following fools. God, who is good, is patient! But He will endure the foolishness of man, only so long.



December 30th, 2016 – Feast of the Holy Family



A Family that is Poor in Spirit, is a Happy Family

The Beatitudes are the successor to the Ten Commandments, the fulfillment of the Law given by God to his people. The Rich Young Man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life and Jesus tells him to observe the (Ten) Commandments, to which the Rich Young Man replies, I have done so since my youth. But the Rich Young Man knows there is more to a life dedicated to God than just observing the Ten Commandments, so he asks Jesus, “but what else?” Jesus replies telling him to sell all his possessions and follow Him.

When I was growing up, I attended Catholic Schools and thus I was taught not only the Ten Commandments, but also the Beatitudes. The one that always puzzled me was the one about being poor in spirit. The other ones were fairly easy to understand, but being poor in spirit made no sense to me. Why would anyone want to be poor in spirituality? Or why would being poor financially be a good thing, everyone wanted to have enough money to take care of their family? As I have continued to study sacred scripture and study the beatitudes specifically I have discovered a much deeper meaning and one that is life giving.

The Poorest Family in Human History



Saint Joseph and Jesus

Today's feast day asks us to reflect on the life of the perfect family, the Holy Family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. This is a family that was truly made in heaven. God himself chose His parents, in fact He created His parents and provided everything they and He would need to be truly happy and serve God in the most perfect way as a family. The Holy Family had everything they needed for perfect peace and a perfect relationship with God in this life and in the life to come. We know very little about the daily life of the Holy Family, but we do know that Mary and Joseph were humble people who had God at the center of their lives, they followed the laws of God (they were married, and made the prescribed offering to God after Jesus was born by presenting him in the Temple) and the laws of man (participating in the Census in Bethlehem) and they had close ties with their extended family (Mary went in haste to be with Elizabeth her cousin after



Finding Jesus in the Temple

the Annunciation and they travelled each year with their relatives to Jerusalem for the major Jewish feasts). We also know that they could have had material wealth due to the gifts the Wise Men brought them at the Epiphany, but there is no evidence that they kept these gifts for their own personal use (there are private revelations which indicate that Joseph kept only what his family needed for their necessities and donated the rest to the poor). Based on the scriptures it is clear that the Holy Family chose to live a life of total reliance on God and used any material wealth they had for the benefit of others. Jesus relied on the generosity of others during his ministry and died as he was born, with nothing except the love of God the Father and the love of His family and His disciples.

Our Things Can Own Us

In the United States we are constantly told that we need this or that thing to be truly happy or to make our

lives complete. Within the context of a family, this desire for accumulating things multiplies as do the problems associated with it. The more things we have, the more things we need to store, maintain and use. I remember one year after Christmas, my wife and I planned a remodel on our home to accommodate not just our growing family, but all the possessions that we had recently acquired. Time is a precious commodity, our possessions require a bit of that time. Toys require that they be stored in between play times, clothes require space to be stored between uses and they need to be washed, and yard tools need to be stored, maintained and fixed when they break. Think about all the things you own, besides their intended use, I am sure you can come up with more ways that these possessions end up requiring something of you. This is not a monetary cost, but what I like to call a soft cost of your time, your space or your thoughts. These costs are real and we only have a finite amount of time, space and mental capacity that we need to manage wisely.

When we contrast the recipe for fulfillment that our society is selling us and the recipe that God showed us, there is a stark difference. God says that he will provide for all our needs, that He knows the number of hairs on our heads and that He loves us more than we can imagine. Perhaps at this time of year, we should take inventory of what is taking away our time, physical space, and money and see if those things are worth their share of these precious resources. Slavery takes many forms, yet we are called to be slaves of God, not of material things.

Detachment



Dream of St. Joseph

Being poor in spirit is to view our wealth and material goods as gifts from God for our benefit. Even if we are wealthy, we can be poor (in spirit) by the way we view the financial wealth and material goods we have. We can share our money and material possessions freely with others. While we may be blessed financially, we don't need to act like it. We should acknowledge that everything we have is a gift from God to be used for His glory and to benefit those around us.

We should also seek to be detached from our schedule. Our daily activities, the social groups we are members of, the sports, clubs and activities our children are involved in are for our benefit, our family should not be slaves to them.

2016 Year in Review

Your Holy Family Ministries had a very good 2016, we did our best to keep our priorities in order. As directors, Denae and I focused on the health of our family, which was no small challenge. We had many significant life changes with our oldest three children. Each of them left our home this year to make their way in the world and each of their paths is significantly different from each other, which made for a lot of late nights and early mornings for us as parents. While we love this ministry and feel that God has called us to engage in it, we are constantly reminded that our ministry work comes after our primary role to parent our children.

The highlights from 2016 include the following:

This contribution is available at <http://www.yourhollyfamily.com/being-poor-in-spirit/>
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No Heart, no Fire [at A Spiritual Journey]

God wants to have our heart, not our mind. If we speak about Christ with our mind only, then everything merely sounds rational. It's only in speaking with our heart that we can set other hearts on fire too. So keep your mind and give God your heart; the mind will follow. Remember that you can only set the heart on fire, not the mind. (When the mind is on fire, it means you have a big headache.)

This contribution is available at <http://journeyofimperfectsaint.blogspot.com/2016/12/no-heart-no-fire.html>
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When Doing Everything Right Doesn't Work

Where do our expectations come from? We'd like to think that if we do a, b, and c, d will result. If I take care of my body, I'll remain healthy. If I work hard and make smart financial decisions, my wealth will grow. If I choose a spouse wisely and honor my vows, my marriage will flourish. If I raise my children with certain values, they will adopt them and enjoy the fruits of their virtue.

But we all know the woman who never touched a cigarette yet contracted lung cancer. The successful entrepreneur who lost everything through theft or a change in the market. A woman whose husband decided he didn't love her anymore and left. Children who abandon their faith and every value their parents held dear.

Sometimes the equation falls apart on our end. After all, am I that certain of my righteousness or [do I merely fail to see my sin](#)? Have I accounted for the fallen nature of not only myself but of my spouse, my children, this whole gosh-darn fallen world we inhabit?

There are no guarantees in life. As I tell my children so often, life isn't fair.

“. . . for He makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.”

Matthew 5:45

What then are we to do? Sulk? Rail at God as man has done through millenia? *Why, God, why? I've been faithful. I've trusted in you. I've prayed, and prayed, and prayed yet I'm not rewarded. How long, O Lord?*

Perhaps I've finally reached a stage of maturity or experience that allows me to look back and see where things have fallen apart. The decisions that seemed wise, yet failed to deliver their promised result. The blacks and whites that have blurred into so many dreary shades of gray.

“They disciplined us for a short time as seemed right to them, but he does so for our benefit, in order that we may share his holiness. At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it.”

Hebrews 12:10-11

Life seems less than fair when we don't get what we deserve. Yet, too often, I calculate fairness as if my perceived unfair losses, and not my unfair gains, were the only side of the equation.

Thank God not every equation adds up, and [we don't get always get what we deserve](#). Sometimes we get more than we deserve.

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The Gift of Unanswered Prayer [at Catholic Stand]

We all have things that regularly appear in our prayer petitions. Some are wants, some needs, and some are desires. As the saying goes, “God has three ways to answer our prayers – yes, no, and not now.” Like any good parent, God the Father indulges us but gives preferential treatment to our needs. Sometimes our needs do not correspond with our wants or desires. Then there are times when we need to be patient and wait – the timeline belongs to God

Wants, Needs, and Desires

Wants are the distractions of our souls. We can never get enough of them. Be they money, fame, delicacies, possessions, or admiration, their attainment fails to satisfy. We always want more. Often the want of more is our downfall. Think of gluttony, pride, envy, and the other [Deadly Sins](#). In their extreme sense, they become a mortal sin, requiring confession.

“For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” (Romans 8:6)

Needs are the essentials that people require to live – nourishment, shelter, clothing, medical care for the sick, and love. Without these necessities, our earthly bodies will soon falter and perish. When we pray for our needs, God hears and helps with these fundamentals. [Matthew 6:26](#) tells us,

“Look at the birds of the heaven, that they sow not, nor reap, nor gather into granaries, and your heavenly Father nourishes them. Are ye not much more excellent than they?”

Desire is the long term range of what we want from our lives. Do we have an important goal, like becoming a saint while here on earth? Is it our desire to serve God while we serve the least of these? Perhaps we feel moved to start a ministry of some sort. If our desire is to live a life pleasing to God, we make sure that we know, love, and serve Him in every aspect of our lives. Then, when we open our hearts to His Word, the path will be illuminated for us.

A Disappointing Response to Prayer

When we receive a response from God, the details might surprise or even disappoint us. If we have the proper disposition, as creature belonging to Creator, we soon begin to realize that a response contrary to our desires may very well be a much better option for our spiritual lives. Surprisingly, it may even be better for our temporal lives as well. All God asks of us is that we keep an open heart and mind. He wants to help us blend His wishes with ours to form us more perfectly for Eternal Life. If we only listen to His call, the prayer answered contrary to our wishes may very well have a wonderful effect – one we never imagined. In any case, making the best of His answers will make for a much more fulfilled life. Father God knows best.

“We are at Jesus’ disposal. If he wants you to be sick in bed, if he wants you to proclaim his work in the street, if he wants you to clean the toilets all day, that’s all right, everything is all right. We must say, ‘I belong to you. you can do whatever you like.’ And this is our strength. This is the joy of the Lord.” -Saint Teresa of Calcutta

Disappointment for Our Family

My own life gives witness to these truths. Unable to have more children, my husband and I decided to adopt and were chosen by a birth mother. One call we had both deeply felt was to have a house full of children. This fervent desire appeared to be coming true for eight months of the pregnancy. Our excitement was tangible and shared by our other, much older children. As the time drew near, we began to see a change of attitude in the mother – nothing blatantly obvious, just a sense that something vital had changed. When our lawyer made the call for which neither of us was prepared, the tears came in waves for days. Why had we not seen this coming? How did this change of mind come after such a long time? We were devastated.

Fast forward a few years, just when Luke would have been a toddler, I was given a devastating diagnosis – BRCA1 breast cancer. This was not just some take a pill, have a lump removed type of cancer – the gene our family carries has killed every woman in my family – three generations back – at forty to fifty years old. Our lives were turned upside down. From chemotherapy and one surgery after another – one lasting sixteen hours – my outlook appeared bleak. This was a debilitating time in my life – I was as helpless as I had ever been and completely reliant on others. While it was a humbling experience to have my husband and daughter take care of even my most basic functions, there was a joy and love never before experienced.

Had our little Luke come to live with us, I am sure we would have found a way to survive, but knowing he was in a good home helped deal with the empty place in our arms and hearts. Four years later, our daughter was diagnosed with the same cancer. She was twenty-eight years old and twenty weeks pregnant. Again, our lives changed drastically. As I had before her, consultation and surgery took us from Kentucky to Texas. The one-year-old son she already had needed care and days were again filled with nursing a loved one. Times like these find me pondering on the gratitude felt for a loving God the Father, who sees us completely – including our most intimate needs.

Prayer is Dialog

Prayer is an open-ended discussion. It is not akin to asking Santa for some favorite wish or toy. Prayer is an ongoing conversation in which we pose our requests while God tempers our gifts for our own benefit. It is also a lifelong endeavor, allowing us to get to know what our Creator wants for us and an opportunity to work *with* Him. As the road we travel, here on earth, winds its way this way and that, our needs, desires, and even wants change. As the Master of the Universe, God knows this and sees ahead, down the path of our lives. Where we see only the darkness of an unlit path, He sees fully in the bright light of His love. What we may need tomorrow or next year or five years from now, God already knows. That is why His responses come from a place of pure love – His every move is designed to help us become the best version of ourselves.

The Gift of Unanswered Prayer

If we keep our minds and hearts open to the nuances of God’s hope for us, we will begin to see a pattern. Even as we voice our wants, needs, and desires – we are able to temper our reactions and expectations. We receive the gift of Patience. In the gift of Wisdom, we are able to discern that the more we empty ourselves of corporal attractions, the more open we are to what God has in store for us and the more Fortitude we display as we wait for an epiphany as to what this might be. After all, God the Father knows best.

Advent offers the opportunity for us to empty ourselves and set up room for Him in our hearts. In what is left of this penitent and anticipatory season, let us weigh the significance of our requests. As we discern for ourselves, it would also be a worthy endeavor to focus on the needs, wants, and desires of others during this giving season. May we have an inspirational Advent, leading us to the magnificence of Christmas joy. This is the Gift our Father in Heaven offers to His children – all we have to do is cooperate.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

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Delving Deep In History Brought Me Home [at A Faith-Full Life]

The [Coming Home Network International](#) recently published an abbreviated version of my conversion story in their monthly newsletter and online at their website. I decided to reproduce the article in it's entirety here along with a PDF of the full newsletter at the bottom of the article. Enjoy!

Delving Deep In History Brought Me Home

We've all heard the maxim, "Your starting point always determines your conclusion," and ordinarily I would wholeheartedly agree. Yet there are exceptions to the rule. In theology and religion, these exceptions are typically referred to as conversions — that is, they involve people whose starting point (like Saul of Tarsus) very much does not determine their conclusion!

Having said that, I also want to say that I was extremely fortunate to be raised in a Christian home by parents who did an outstanding job of acquainting me with the Person of Jesus Christ and the holy Scriptures. Our Christian faith was the center of our life and identity as a family. Over the years, we attended various denominational and non-denominational churches, but they were all characterized by the idea that the Bible alone was our only basis for truth, faith, morals, and authority.

From a young age I was fascinated by the study of theology, and I would often engage in theological discussions with the adults I knew, probing them for answers to thorny questions. Nevertheless, I frequently found myself at odds with the accepted theological beliefs of our Christian friends, many of whom might best be described as Evangelical Fundamentalists. In particular, starting when I was about seventeen, I began to struggle with the idea of "the Bible alone." I couldn't seem to get a good answer as to where this idea had come from, or more importantly, where the Bible asserted this doctrine. I found myself at odds with the doctrine of sola Scriptura for primarily logical reasons. If it is "the Bible and the Bible alone," as every church we attended proclaimed, then where does the Bible make this claim?

When I studied the Bible, it seemed to argue against Scripture alone because it was full of instances when God spoke through direct revelation to His people, or even through intermediaries such as prophets, priests, judges, and kings. In Scripture, I saw that God revealed Himself through His creation, through His incarnate Son who dwelt among us, through His Church, and especially through His Apostles who, "*delivered to [us] as of first importance what [they] also received*"¹. In other words, with the notable exception of the Ten Commandments, He didn't choose to simply drop a written user's manual from heaven in order to communicate with us.

I also noticed that, even when Scripture was interpreted by those who were honestly trying to follow God and submit to Scripture's authority in their lives, they invariably arrived at very different conclusions from one another. In other words, far from Scripture being the final authority, it really just opened the floodgates for division and a lack of certainty within the Church. This division, especially when it came to our inability to agree on what constituted salvation, has always bothered me tremendously.

Since at that point I didn't have any frame of reference to categorize this issue and others as fundamentally "Protestant versus Catholic," I concluded that these were issues I had with Christianity in general —

issues that most other Christians didn't share. I wondered if my faith was in some way lacking, and I was concerned that my views were "unorthodox," without realizing that they might more accurately be described as "unorthodox Protestant views." As it turns out, many of those views were entirely orthodox from a Catholic perspective!

I attended a year of Bible College but quit after getting married, and gradually my wife and I gravitated towards "Bible churches," like Calvary Chapel, and then non-denominational churches that avoided any doctrine that could be considered remotely divisive but fundamentally sought to bring people into a personal relationship with Christ. This could be both good (less divisiveness), and bad (a reduced ability to proclaim truth). These churches taught that a "relationship with Christ" was the ultimate truth — the only truth which really mattered ("no creed but Christ"). Many of the churches we attended might be summed up by the statement, "Just me, my Bible, and Jesus."

Through the years that followed, I was always involved in some kind of ministry; I really enjoyed studying theology and teaching others. We moved to Boise, Idaho when I was around thirty and became involved with a small non-denominational church in the town of Kuna. Many of the leaders there had ties to Boise Bible College, and one of the founding pastors was a professor there. During our time in that congregation, I had the opportunity to take non-accredited classes through Boise Bible College and was eventually asked to move into a ministerial role, serving as one of the pastors.

Feeling led by God to move towards ministry as a full-time vocation, I applied and was accepted into a Master's of Divinity program through Fuller Seminary. Due to my previous individual studies and my ministerial experience, they were willing to make a special provision for me in spite of the fact that I hadn't completed an undergraduate degree. I was definitely moving along in a certain direction, and for me that direction did not include the Catholic Church!

In fact, I had always been somewhat anti-Catholic. I was raised in an environment that was dubious over whether Catholics were saved, and I had contact with an occasional Fundamentalist who was convinced that the Catholic Church was the beast of Revelation and the Pope was the Antichrist! If you had suggested to me a few years ago that I would one day be considering conversion to Catholicism, I would have laughed. I had no inkling that the Catholic Church would ever be even a remote consideration; I would have thought it as likely as my converting to Islam or Hinduism.

There was, however, a gradual softening over the years in my attitude towards Catholicism. In Idaho, I began to read authors like Henri Nouwen, Thomas Aquinas, and Thomas Merton. I began to realize that some of the authors whom I most admired and who had influenced me the most were either Catholic themselves, or strongly Catholic in their theology, as was the case with the Anglican C.S. Lewis. As I read these Catholic authors, theologians, and philosophers, I discovered, to my great surprise, that not only were they Christians, but in many cases profoundly so. They were, in fact, some of the most deeply committed and insightful Christians, apologists, theologians, and philosophers I had encountered! This didn't change my mind on Catholicism, but it definitely began to soften my previously dismissive attitude.

As I continued to delve into Catholicism with a progressively more open attitude, I was surprised to find that much of what I thought I knew about Catholic belief was either flat out wrong, wasn't fair to the nuances of their position, or was based on "straw-man" arguments.

I also discovered that many of the authors I had been reading were converts to the Faith. Men like G.K. Chesterton, Peter Kreeft, and John Henry Cardinal Newman. The latter once famously said, "To be deep

in history is to cease to be Protestant.” While I am not sure that this maxim could apply to everyone, it was certainly true in my case.

I decided to teach a Church history class at the church where I was pastoring. I wanted to tie each portion of Church history to an influential Christian of that period, someone who had really made a difference in the life of the Church. My goal was to give attendees some familiarity with the heroes of the faith since the time of Christ and to provide positive role models who would inspire our congregation to live lives of heroic virtue themselves. I didn’t think of these heroes as “saints,” nor did I realize that this idea of a “communion of saints” was of Catholic origin.

It was an ambitious undertaking, especially since I had never intensively studied Church history prior to the Reformation. All my studies up to that point had either been broad overviews or thorough studies of one particular facet of Church history, such as the Reformation itself or the early American Revivals.

Like many Protestants, for me, Church history began in the Book of Acts and then in some vague and undefined way “veered off course” around the time of Constantine. Then there were even vaguer interludes of crusades and inquisitions, with Church history thankfully resuming some 1500 years after Christ with the Protestant Reformation! As I spent many hours preparing to teach my class, studying multiple Protestant Church history books, for the first time it came home to me that...

During the first 1,500 years of Christianity — for fully three quarters of all Christian history — to be Christian was almost always to be Catholic!

All of the early Church Fathers, saints, theologians, etc. were Catholic! With the exception of Orthodoxy, there was no other Christian church until the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries! I know that it may seem kind of dumb, but this floored me! I had never before taken the time to consider it from an intellectual perspective.

Even acknowledging the heartbreaking split between Orthodoxy and Catholicism in 1054, you still had Churches who were apostolic, sacramental, and unified in their teaching of the Christian Faith. From the time of Christ until some 500 years ago there was no question as to whether Catholic theology, teaching, and practice were an authentic expression of Christianity, because the universal or “catholic” expression of Christianity was the only one that existed! Perhaps I shouldn’t say that “there was no question,” because there have always been heretics and dissenters to the true Faith. But, heresies aside, the Church was one, holy, apostolic — and catholic — until very recently in history.

I will readily admit that reform was needed within the Catholic Church during the time of the Protestant Reformation; but in reality the Church is always and in every age in need of reform because she is composed of sinners such as myself. It is a historical fact that Luther didn’t intend to leave the Catholic Church but to reform it. Furthermore, his excommunication from the Catholic Church was for his heresy, not for his reforming efforts. Consider the following quote from Luther himself:

“That the Roman Church is more honored by God than all others is not to be doubted. St. Peter and St. Paul, forty-six Popes, some hundreds of thousands of martyrs, have laid down their lives in its communion, having overcome Hell and the world; so that the eyes of God rest on the Roman Church with special favor. Though nowadays everything is in a wretched state, it is no ground for separating from the Church. On the contrary, the worse things are going, the more should we hold close to her, for it is not by separating from the Church that we can make her better. We must not separate from God on

account of any work of the devil, nor cease to have fellowship with the children of God who are still abiding in the pale of Rome on account of the multitude of the ungodly. There is no sin, no amount of evil, which should be permitted to dissolve the bond of charity or break the bond of unity of the body. For love can do all things, and nothing is difficult to those who are united.”²

And this is precisely where I began to have my own problems, because when I looked at the five solae of the Protestant Reformation — the doctrines of sola Fide (by faith alone), sola Scriptura (by Scripture alone), solus Christus (through Christ alone), sola Gratia (by grace alone), and soli Deo Gloria (glory to God alone) that divide Protestants from Catholics — I found that I disagreed with most of them.

I’ve spoken to many Protestant friends who have agreed with me on various aspects of my objections to the five solae, but then they say that those aren’t the reasons why they reject Catholicism; they have their own reasons! Maybe they reject Catholicism because of its teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist; but Luther and Calvin still believed in the Real Presence after their split from the Catholic Church! In fact, this doctrine was the reason for the first of the divisions (the one between Luther and Zwingli) which have so plagued the Protestant movement over the past 500 years. Often my Protestant friends don’t realize how many Catholic beliefs and practices were held by the fathers of the Reformation, even after their break from the Catholic Church. The Reformers believed in the necessity of Baptism, the veneration of Mary and the saints, the value of Confession, and much more — not because these were Catholic beliefs, but rather because they were the historic, orthodox, and scriptural positions of Christians from the time of Christ forward!

The bottom line was that the more I looked at it, the more it seemed as if the objections to Catholicism that the Reformers initially held weren’t objections that my friends or I shared!

This led me to begin to study what the early Church actually believed when it came to Sacred Tradition, Confession, the Eucharist, Baptism of infants, the necessity of Baptism, the Communion of the Saints, and other Catholic positions. To my shock, I found that virtually all Catholic doctrine has its roots in the teachings of the early Church — and almost all of it is attested to within the first two hundred years after Christ! There has obviously been an ongoing process of defining doctrine, along with the refinement and development of that doctrine, but I was shocked at just how many Catholic doctrines were actually early Church doctrines.

This obviously destroyed my previous assumption that somehow, around the time of Constantine or shortly thereafter, the Church was led into error, probably due to Roman influence, and that human reason and the traditions of men had gradually replaced the true authority of the Scriptures. Instead, I was forced to ask the question:

“If the early Church was wrong, was she wrong from the very start? If not, why have we dispensed with so much of what the early Church believed, practiced, and taught based on the say-so of Martin Luther and other Protestant Reformers? We are still following the ‘traditions of men’ — just men of much more recent descent.”

That was my problem. There were logical inconsistencies with the arguments from the Protestant side that I just couldn’t seem to resolve. You have men arguing against the authority of the Catholic Church and for the authority of Scripture alone. But ultimately, all they are saying is that they, rather than the Church, have the right to interpret Scripture and teach doctrine authoritatively. This requires us to believe that God didn’t work through His Church to teach right doctrine and properly interpret Scripture, but instead to

believe that God has worked through Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the other Reformers to teach right doctrine and properly interpret Scripture.

Aside from the historical difficulties, I was also struggling with the lack of moral and religious certitude that Protestantism was able to offer. This uncertainty had always bothered me intellectually, but it bothered me increasingly in practical ways as well. As a father of three boys, certain things were very clear; for instance, there must be no sex outside of marriage. Other things were much less clear: Is masturbation right or wrong? My father had been taught that masturbation was a sin; however, Dr. James Dobson, an Evangelical Christian psychologist, said that masturbation was natural and not a sin. Who was right?

To me, this issue of truth and certainty seemed to highlight a fundamental difference between Protestants and the Catholics. Within my Protestant upbringing there was no agreement, and therefore no certainty, on what is necessary for salvation: whether salvation can be lost, whether Baptism is necessary, whether works are necessary in addition to faith, or whether the gifts of the Holy Spirit are still with us. And so on.

This lack of certainty began to bother me even more profoundly when I became a pastor. I found it unacceptable to be unable to answer our congregation with any degree of certainty not only on doctrinal issues, but on questions of morality as well. Is masturbation wrong? Is birth control wrong? Is divorce and remarriage okay? What about homosexuality? For me, the answer could not be, “I don’t know” or, “My opinion is” This was unacceptable to me both as a father and as a shepherd of God’s people.

So, do I believe that we can know everything with certainty? No. Do I believe that we should be able to articulate what is necessary both for salvation and to live a life pleasing to God? Yes. Do I believe that we should be able to declare with all Christians everywhere the historic creeds of Christendom, confident that they are true and certain summaries of our faith? Yes.

We had moved to northern California and I had taken a new job, largely to allow me to begin work on my Master’s of Divinity at Fuller’s Sacramento campus. But suddenly I found myself at a crossroad. I had taken a step of faith and relocated my family so that I could get my degree and pursue full-time vocational ministry, and now I was seriously considering not only the claims of the Catholic Church, but also what claim that Church might have on my life.

Coming to the point of actual conversion was difficult. Not because of doubts; for the first time in my life I was receiving answers to my previously unanswerable questions! The difficulty was instead in accepting the words of Christ: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:34–39). The difficulty lay in forsaking friends and family and church for the sake of Christ, of letting go of my plans and dreams and desires and giving them to Jesus. Could I trust Him to lead me even when I didn’t know where my final destination would be or why the journey there had become so difficult?

Throughout this process, our friends and family were incredibly gracious, but they were also concerned

for our well-being. As I have remarked on my internet home page, “It is often difficult to describe to others all the individual steps taken along the path which have brought you along the way to where you are today. Many have perhaps misunderstood my decision as that of leaving behind one thing for something else, when in reality the experience has been one of adding to, not of taking away — of entering into the fullness of the Christian Faith.”

Many have asked me why I felt that it was necessary to enter the Catholic Church, and I cannot find a more perfect answer than that of G.K. Chesterton: “*The difficulty of explaining ‘why I am a Catholic’ is that there are ten thousand reasons all amounting to one reason: that Catholicism is true.*” I would add that, for me, there was also the indescribable joy of finding my home, of arriving at the place where I belong.

For me, the process was one of intensive study for almost two years before I finally told my wife, Missy, that I needed to begin attending Mass and exploring for myself the claims of the Catholic Church. I promised her that I would continue to go to church with her and the kids, but that I could no longer resist God’s pull towards Catholicism in my life. When I said that, I honestly didn’t know if she would agree to attend Mass with me or not. But she was willing to go for my sake, and for six months we attended a local non-denominational church in the morning and St. Teresa of Avila’s parish in the evening as a family. (My kids really got a lot of church during that time!) Missy and I agreed to enroll in RCIA classes (the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults), and nine months later, on Easter Vigil of 2013, we were all received together into the Catholic Church. I can honestly say that that Easter Vigil service was one of the most profound and joyful experiences of my life!

All of this isn’t to say that I no longer have any questions at all or that I am under some delusion that the Catholic Church is perfect. She has obviously had her share of failings and problems over the years and will continue to do so — maybe even more so now that I am a member! There have been priests who were dismal failures, bishops and popes who were motivated by greed, selfishness, and a desire for power rather than love. The Church has done things both amazing and horrific in the name of God.

But ... she is Christ’s bride, made holy and without blemish by Christ Himself and by the righteous deeds of His saints³. And like all brides, she has been joined to Him that the two may become one flesh. It is through this incarnational mystery that we, as the bride of Christ, become in that marital union of one flesh, the very Body of Christ, with Himself as our head⁴.

You see, for me, the balance had shifted, and I could no longer in good conscious consider myself Protestant. As I pointed out in an article I wrote, entitled “Sola Scriptura — An Anachronism”:

“There is a theory which I have heard proposed in many different ways by many different groups over the years. It is always vaguely articulated, but generally it loosely follows the same formula, namely, that sometime during the first 1,500 years of Christianity, the Church was led into error and that human reason and meaningless Church tradition gradually replaced the true authority of the Scriptures. At face value, I have a sizable problem with any theory that proposes itself in contradiction to the words of Christ, who said, ‘I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it’⁵. Every Christian denomination which has since split from that Church, has essentially proposed some variation of the theory above. Namely, that Christ was wrong, His Church was not preserved by Him, the gates of Hell did prevail against it, and it has now become necessary to split from the Church which He founded and start an entirely new church in order to return to the original

teachings of Christ.”

I have come to the conviction that it was indeed Christ who founded His Church — not Luther, or Calvin, or Zwingli, or the King of England, or John and Charles Wesley, or Joseph Smith, or Chuck Smith, or anyone else since that time.

I have decided to trust in the plain words of Christ preserved in the Scriptures for us. Yes, I have decided that — when He guaranteed His Church that He would be with her always, even to the end of the age; and when He promised her that He would preserve her against the very gates of Hell — He meant what He said. I have decided that if I am to be His disciple, then I should begin with obedience — and in obedience, belong to the Church which He established. And finally, I have decided that Christ is not into polygamy — He only desires one bride, one Church.

I will leave you with the words of G.K. Chesterton: *“It is impossible to be just to the Catholic Church. The moment a man ceases to pull against it he feels a tug towards it. The moment he ceases to shout it down he begins to listen to it with pleasure. The moment he tries to be fair to it he begins to be fond of it. But when that affection has passed a certain point it begins to take on the tragic and menacing grandeur of a great love affair.”*

And here’s the full newsletter: [Coming Home Newsletter September 2016](#)

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1. 1 Corinthians 15:3 [↔](#)
 2. Martin Luther — An Instruction on Certain Articles: late February 1519 [↔](#)
 3. Ephesians 5:25–27, Revelation 19:7–9 [↔](#)
 4. Colossians 1:18a, 24; 2:17–19 [↔](#)
 5. Matthew 16:18b [↔](#)

This contribution is available at <http://adamncrawford.com/delving-deep-history-brought-home>
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My [latest article at Catholic 365](#):

Are we using this beautiful time of Advent to prepare our hearts for Christmas? Or is the Christmas hype distracting us?

Some may think that Lent is the only good time for fasting. However, both Lent and Advent are penitential seasons of the liturgical year and both are ideal times for fasting. **Advent is often called a “mini-Lent.”**

Is it even possible to fast during Advent when Christmas parties occur weekly and when the world starts celebrating Christmas before Advent even begins?

Yes, it is possible! **The important thing is to start.**

Fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays helps us to focus on the spiritual value of this beautiful season. This is the time for preparing our hearts and souls. Jesus indeed comes to save his people and we must be prepared to meet Him and to celebrate the beautiful feast of His birthday.

Praying, fasting, reading Scripture and almsgiving are all ideal ways to prepare during Advent. However, fasting especially puts a light under our prayers and helps us to remain focused on the spiritual, rather than the commercial, aspects of Advent and Christmas.

St. John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* (1994) said, “*Jesus himself has shown us by his own example that **prayer and fasting are the first and most effective weapons against the forces of evil.***” (P.101-102)

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said, “*In our own day, fasting seems to have lost something of its spiritual meaning, and has taken on, in a culture characterized by the search for material well-being, a therapeutic value for the care of one’s body. Fasting certainly brings benefits to physical well-being, but for believers, it is, in the first place, a “therapy” to heal **all that prevents them from conformity to the will of God.***”

If you’ve never fasted before, consider giving up meat, coffee and/or treats on Wednesdays and Fridays during Advent. Rather than 24 hours, perhaps try to fast for 12 hours. Once you’ve mastered fasting from

meat, coffee and/or treats, then you can try eating less foods or even try to fast on bread and water alone.

For more information on how to get started with fasting, [check out our website](#). **Always check with your physician** before beginning any fasting routine.

To sign up for the LTF free biweekly fasting newsletter, [click here](#).

[Live the Fast](#) is a Roman Catholic Apostolate that is focused on bringing more awareness to the discipline of fasting by offering educational resources on prayer and fasting, a prayer community that will inspire one to live the fast and providing nutritious fasting breads. (Priests and religious receive fasting breads and resources free of charge.)

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This contribution is available at <http://ellengable.wordpress.com/2016/12/02/advent-the-ideal-time-for-fasting/>
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One of my favorite things to do this time of year is to watch the movie, “*A Christmas Carol*.” One of my favorite scenes from the movie is when the ghost of Jacob Marley visits his old partner Ebenezer Scrooge. Marley tries to warn Scrooge to change his ways before it is too late. It’s too late for Marley, who drags the chains of sin and neglect with him for all eternity; for he had turned his back on mankind. Marley is seven years deceased, and warns Scrooge that Scrooge’s chains of sin and neglect are far greater than Marley’s, since Scrooge has had an additional seven years to commit sin and neglect. Jacob Marley tries to impart some wisdom; to explain to Ebenezer the error of his own ways by stating:

“Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, benevolence, were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!” – Charles Dickens

Mankind is Our Business!

Wow! Now take a look at your own life. How many chains of sin and neglect might you be carrying around? How are you doing at expressing charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence toward your neighbor? Do you understand that mankind is your business? In our society of ever-growing individualism, I think we are losing sight of the fact that mankind is our business.

God placed each of us here on this earth, at this time in history, to serve Him; to do His will. Mankind is definitely God’s business, and we all have our own part to play in God’s business. Therefore, mankind is our business too! We are all God’s children, and that makes all other members of mankind our brothers and sisters; all members of one family. God placed us here to love one another, to be merciful towards each other, to be kind rather than always needing to be right, to be cheerful and charitable towards each other.

From the quote above, I think the most important phrase is “*The common welfare was my business.*” Because of individualism, how often do we only think of ourselves rather than others? For example, look at all of the special interests in Congress, only looking out for themselves, and not the common good. As a society, we carry very heavy chains of sin and neglect.

Break Free From the Chains

The remedy for positive change – of moving away from sin and neglect, and moving toward holiness and charity – is to follow Ebenezer Scrooge’s path to virtue. At the end of the movie, he has a conversion of heart. Scrooge becomes one of the most beloved people in his family and town. He shares love; gives to charity, and becomes kind and patient. He becomes benevolent.

So, what can you do? Start small and work your way toward more impactful things. Begin within your own family by being more charitable, merciful, patient and kind. Take that behavior into the workplace and be a beacon of Christ’s light for others to be drawn to; make mankind your business! Make the common welfare your business.

This contribution is available at <http://virginalieto.com/mankind-is-my-business/>
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Embracing Grief at the Holidays [at Books, Bargains, Blessings]



I think most of us can remember a time we loved the holidays. Santa Claus. Our grandparents giving us huge hugs -- and even bigger gifts. The smells of the once a year treats from the oven, and laughter of cousins. I think for many of us somewhere along the way the magic of Christmas has turned into dread or endurance.

My husband and I didn't put up a Christmas tree this year. It has always been my favorite part of Christmas. I love looking through the ornaments and remembered so many good times. The doll my 2nd grade teacher made out of a pack of lifesavers and a styrofoam ball head. Yes, I have a roll of 33 year old candy in my Christmas decorations. I loved my teacher, and the fact she made something for me was so special. (She made one for each of us in our class.) But then there are the other ornaments. Childhood creations from people who won't speak to me any longer. Ornaments bought on years the holidays wouldn't be considered "good". The year a family member threw out all the gifts I gave him.

Then there are the ornaments that bring back fun memories that just make me sad as I tell the story. My dad always had a habit of asking delivery truck drivers if they had any free samples. Before the advent of computers, many actually did. Often he would walk away with a handful of out of date pastries and chips. One of my Christmas ornaments was on a box of donuts that was given him when he asked for free samples. I love the story, but it also makes me sad. I miss my dad and his antics.

This is the eleventh Christmas without my dad. The 3rd without my mother, the 22nd without my beloved grandmother (Christmas never seemed the same after she passed away). I'm more aware than ever who is missing at the holidays than I ever have been. Two years ago I spent Christmas bracing for my last

funeral of the year. In February 2014, I buried my mother. In September of that year, Grandpa Wilson, and in December of that year, a friend from high school. Because he died at Christmas, Joey will always be thought of and missed this time of year. (There were a number of other friends, family, and neighbors who died that year, but I could only force myself to those three funerals as difficult a year as it was for me.)

There was a commercial when I was growing up for a store called Hills that began, "Before the lights were strung around the world, there was a silent night". Yes, yes there was. I was fortunate enough to make a trip to Israel in 2006, and I stood at the very spot where Jesus is thought to be born. I had just bought some souvenirs and happened to have bought olive wood rosaries for my Catholic friends, so I made a point of touching them to that spot to make them more special. I did the same later that day at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Jesus. The reason we have CHRIST-MASS.

A friend who went with me to Israel was commenting while we were there that Israel commemorates emptiness. When visiting the Western Wall, you don't visit the Temple because it's not there. You visit the closest you can get to the Holy of Holies. When you visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (if you are Catholic) or the Garden Tomb (if you are Protestant), you aren't visiting the remains of Jesus. He isn't there. You are visiting the emptiness of that burial spot. The holiest place to me in Israel was The Mount of Olives. I can't describe it, but the energy there was absolutely intense with goodness. Maybe it was the first site I visited in Israel, maybe it was the site itself, maybe it was just looking over the holy city at night for the first time. But it was a highlight of my trip. But I can't explain why. Again, the emptiness. I felt the prayers of all the people through the ages who had been on that mountain. Those prayers made that a holy place. But it wasn't because what was seen.

This holiday is another I am spending mainly by myself. My husband volunteered to work extra to allow a coworker to spend more time with their family. I don't even have my favorite decoration hung on the wall this year. When I was little, there was a cheap plastic Santa face with a blinking light inside. As a toddler, my dad would hoist me on his shoulders and tell me Santa's nose wouldn't start blinking until I gave it a kiss. The nose of Old St. Nick is dented, discolored, and to me, beautiful. It looks like nothing to most people -- and I always am telling handymen to be careful with it, and no matter what it looks like to not throw it away. It's value isn't intrinsic, but its value is the memories. The first Christmas without Dad, I kissed the Santa nose for the first time in almost 30 years. It was my tribute to the first jolly fat man I knew and loved -- my dad, and I have honored my dad that way every year since when I have put up that wall hanging.

Many of us have a choice. We can allow grief to wash over us. We can stay there, or we can appreciate the grief for what it is -- memories. If we didn't feel grief, it means we never had someone or something we loved taken away. And I would rather have the memories of my grandmother who was bipolar showing up to our Christmas dinner in a dress and a WVU baseball cap, the time my mother was baking and a roll got stuck to the top of the oven, the time my friend Joey called me when I was upset with him at

Christmastime and told me he was sorry. I was reduced to tears because I knew I was the one in the wrong. A mended friendship that, unknown to me, would end on that very day twenty some years later as death snatched him from us too soon. These memories make me sad, but I am happy I had them, and I cherish them.

My husband and I are creating new traditions this year. Among other things we are lighting a couple candles tonight. Thanking God for what we do have this year. But I'm also going to take a little while, clutch a rosary I bought in Israel, and remember what makes this time of year empty -- and be thankful for it. It means I loved, and very few things we can hold forever, but we can treasure the memories. I encourage you to do the same.

This contribution is available at <http://www.booksbargainsblessings.com/2016/12/holidays-and-grief.html>
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Resolutions... and Why I Avoid Them [at Afternoon Coffee & Evening Tea]

Just like that, it is January. The time of year when many people resolve to do things differently. I am not one of those people. Through the years, I have learned that making resolutions does not work for me. That is not to say it doesn't work for others. For me, however, making resolutions to stop eating sweets or to start exercising everyday is setting myself up for failure. And that is not awesome.

I could make a resolution to exercise more.



And I would start and do it for a few days, maybe even a week.

But honestly, I just don't enjoy it.

And that means I won't do it.

Period.



I much prefer to spend my free time cozy in a chair reading a good book.

That...I will do.

So maybe I don't resolve to exercise every single day.

Maybe I will make an effort to walk down the road on a nice day with Flynn instead.

Or play a game of basketball with Peyton and Rhett.

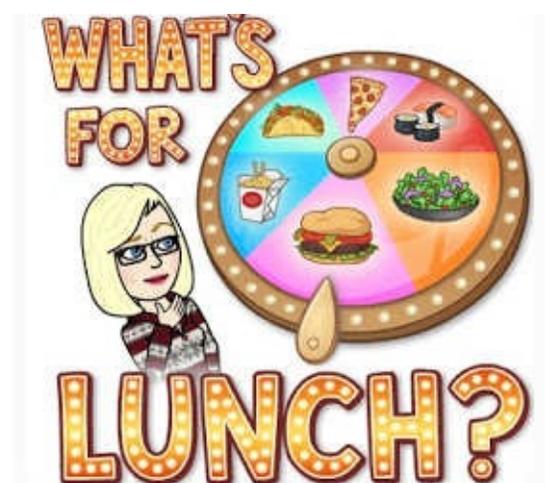


I am not making a resolution to completely revamp my eating habits.

I know from experience that doesn't work for me long term.

I like food too much.

Truth.



What I can do is be mindful of the choices I am making each day.

If I am having pizza for dinner, maybe I could choose something a bit healthier for lunch, right?



But giving up desserts?

Not likely. :)



Lastly, I cannot resolve to stop worrying.

My anxiety is a part of who I am.



I can continue utilizing the mindfulness meditation and prayers that enable me to put things in perspective.

And lean on my loved ones when I need a helping hand.



So, my friends, that is how I deal with the pressure of making New Years Resolutions.

I don't.

I am mindful of who I am and what I can and will accomplish.

This year, I will continue to be me.

And strive to be a happy, healthy, content, prayerful, mindful, thankful me.

Happy New Year to each one of you, my friends.

Waugh on Campion

Today is the feast of St. Edmund Campion, Jesuit priest and English Elizabethan martyr. His story was told in 1935 by Evelyn Waugh, better known for his fiction, chief of which in my estimation is *Brideshead Revisited*. Waugh wrote in the Preface to *Saint Edmund Campion* that he was not attempting a scholar's approach to his subject.

All I have sought to do is to select incidents which strike a novelist as important and to put them into a narrative which I hope may prove readable. The facts are not in dispute so I have left the text unencumbered by notes or bibliography. It should be read as a simple, perfectly true story of heroism and holiness.

I'm marking the saint's feast by re-reading Waugh's book about him. When we think of English Catholic martyrs nowadays, I think most thoughts turn to St. Thomas More – a man worth remembering, to be sure. Campion more than holds in own in such company. His apologia to the Queen's Privy Council as he was undergoing persecution is provided by Waugh as a final chapter, too important to be designated an appendix. These are Campion's own words, written as he knew his execution by the anti-Catholic government was a foregone conclusion:

And touching our Societie, be it known to you that we have made a league – all the Jesuits in the world, whose succession and multitude must overreach all the practices of England – cheerfully to carry the cross you shall lay, and never to despair your recovery, while we have a man left to enjoy your Tyburn, or to be racked with your torments, or consumed with your prisons. The expense is reckoned, the enterprise is begun; it is of God, it cannot be withstood. So the Faith was planted; so it must be restored.

...I have no more to say but to recommend your case and mine to Almighty God, the Searcher of Hearts, who send us His grace, and set us at accord before the day of payment, to the end we may at last be friends in Heaven, when all injuries shall be forgotten.

My edition of *Saint Edmund Campion* is a reprint from Sophia Institute Press from about twenty years ago; I'm sorry that the book is no longer listed in the publisher's online catalog. [Amazon.com](#) steps into the breach with at least two editions.

Writing in the mid-1930s, Waugh in his Preface to *Campion* wrote presciently about how the sixteenth-century martyr would speak to us in our own day.

We have seen the Church driven underground in one country after another. The martyrdom of Father [now Blessed] Pro in Mexico re-enacted Campion's. In fragments and whispers we get news of other saints in the prison camps of eastern and southeastern Europe, of cruelty and degradation more frightful than anything in Tudor England and of the same pure light shining in the darkness, uncomprehended. The hunted, trapped, murdered priest is amongst us again, and the voice of Campion comes to us across the centuries as though he were walking at our side.

This contribution is available at <http://ellenkolb.com/2016/12/01/waugh-on-campion/>
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Auld Lang Syne [at With Us Still]

On the final day of 2016, John has some intriguing words to share with his readers.

John the Evangelist, that is – two of whose works are excerpted in the [readings we hear at Mass on December 31](#).

The first reading, from the second chapter of 1 John, started this way:

Children, it is the last hour...

A few minutes later, we heard proclaimed the opening lines of the Gospel according to John:

In the beginning was the Word...

An apt liturgical reminder – and all the nudge I needed to turn my heart to gratitude for the many blessings of the past 12 months. Among the most memorable: A mid-summer vacation trip to [Scotland, the very same country](#) – I'm told – that gave us *Auld Lang Syne*, a phrase that means 'times gone by'...



Love enough to share...

Looking back through the blog entries I've posted since January, it's clear my own *Auld Lang Syne* proved remarkably rich in 2016 – filled to overflowing with cherished endings...beginnings... and many 'milestone moments' in between.

So in these last hours of 2016, I look back on a handful of my favorite encounters along the way...giving praise and thanks to the Alpha and Omega, from whom all these good things flow.

[Ruach](#)

'Turn into the wind – the ruach – and the Spirit will take you,' he said. 'The Spirit desires to take us to impossible destinations...to places where there is no path...to places we could never get to on our own.'

[Halls of Heaven](#)

For me, it called to mind the soul-stirring events of the past seven days. I remembered how, just a week ago, I'd witnessed a dear aunt's passing. She died last Friday afternoon, just 28 hours or so after her husband had passed away.

[Amazed](#)

Fresh back from the cruise vacation she'd taken with her family the previous week, Hannah greeted me—not with a 'hello' or a hug—but with two startling new phrases she'd added to her toddler's vocabulary. "Take off!" she said to me, her eyes widening with the excitement of the memory. "Fly hoome!"

[Caper](#)

Every once in a while, you get confirmation that miracles do indeed still happen. Such was the case late last week, when months of intricate planning—and more than a little intrigue and subterfuge—culminated in a memorable birthday event for my dear spouse.

[Encrusted](#)

It takes a fair amount of power to wash away 50 years' worth of grime. A couple of my brothers and I discovered this semi-obvious fact last week when we teamed up to clean a pad of concrete in our mother's backyard, to prepare for the sale of her home. "Her home"...as in "our home" – the place where we grew up in the 1960s and 70s.

[Slieve League](#)

It's a rare thing when a 2,000-foot precipice catches you by surprise. A rare, beautiful thing.

[Lost-and-found](#)

It was an odd feeling, gazing out over the gentle contours of the grassy acres where my home once stood.

[Heaven Scent](#)

For the most part, our grandson Francis seemed mildly amused by his impending baptism on Saturday afternoon. Then he dozed off, just before the water was about to cascade over his forehead.



Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ...our Alpha and Omega

Let us pause now...to recall that we are in the presence of the Holy & Merciful One.

IHS

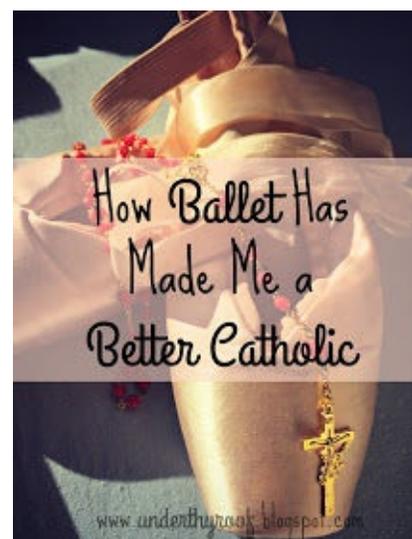
This contribution is available at <http://withusstill.wordpress.com/2016/12/31/todays-find-auld-lang-syne/>
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How Ballet Has Made Me a Better Catholic [at Under Thy Roof]

When I'm in seasons like this one where I'm going to a different rehearsal every night and wearing my many hats, the lines between my little life categories start to blur. I start dancing in my theater rehearsal, praying while I sew ballet costumes, and slipping into my British accent for this play while in mass.

I believe I haven't been as successful compartmentalizing my life as I wanted to believe. Things have been bleeding into each other, and that's actually a good thing. In particular, I think dancing Ballet over the past year has actually made me a better Catholic. Here's why.



1

Always Returning to Basics

Something I think a lot of cradle Catholics struggle with is forcing ourselves to re-approach things we think of as Catholic basics. There's an, perhaps unconscious, assumption that we have concepts like the Trinity down since "we covered that in 3rd Grade CCD, right?"

In Ballet, no matter if you're a 4-year old pre-ballet student or a seasoned Principal dancer, we all take

class and we all start that class with plies. Yes, they will be harder and longer combinations the more experienced you are, but the basic bones are always there, no matter how long you've been dancing.

The basics aren't basic because they're easy but because they're *fundamental*. Everything else will not make sense without them. While Catholic theology might not be the kind of physical impossible that a Ballet would be without a firm grasp of tendu and plie, you are probably making logically impossible leaps by not dealing with those basics.

2

Respect for Tradition

Here's something crazy about Ballet - we have no standard notation system. There is no universal method for writing down ballets. What you see performed on stage has largely been memorized by the dancers and taught to them by a ballet master who in turn memorized the ballet from their ballet master. This means dancers have a deep respect for that lineage of teachers who have carried down ballets, many over centuries.

It suddenly becomes so much easier to accept the teaching of the Magisterium when you at least have access to documents of councils and the homilies of the Church fathers.

3

Identities are Information Not Predestination

When dancing with others, as you're likely to do, at some point you get to know them better. You might find out more about their past, political leanings, preferences, and quirks. In ballet, that is at most just information about your fellow dancers - not a determination of their limits.

I've seen so much unfortunate pigeonholing of fellow Catholics merely because they're not exactly what you expected them to be. Ballet has been a great practice in seeing people for who they are, but for also expecting them to grow and develop - what we're supposed to be doing as Catholics anyway.

4

Daily Leaps of Faith

There are things in Catholicism and Ballet that can only be prepared for and controlled up to a certain point. This was really hard for me. I'm very Type A and I like to know how things are going to turn out.

Even the best dancers can only control certain turns so far. There is a point where you just have to go for it. I don't have complete control over things like the results of discernment, but I have to get better at rolling with what comes out of prayer.

5

You Need a Mix of Old and New

We are no longer in a world where the different schools of Ballet are developing in isolation from each other. The internet has been a boon to Ballet students who can now take advantage of the wisdom of professional dancers via Youtube and seek inspiration via Instagram. This also means that the traditions of each style are often getting mixed with the training in other forms of ballet and other forms of dance.

Catholicism is experiencing something similar. It's far easier to be exposed to the traditions of other Catholic rites now more than ever. We have blogs where families are allowing intimate views of how these traditions play out, Youtube channels of musicians letting their faith shape their music in beautiful ways, Etsy shops where creative Catholics make the fruits of their labor available to others.

None of these developments mean we are abandoning the traditions of the past - we're finding ways to integrate the tradition into the world we have now, while remaining distinctively who we are.

6

No One Else is Just Like You

Yes it's totally a cheesy Disney movie line, but it's true. It's truth shines out when you start dancing something as technically demanding as ballet.

Most of us have really weird body things going on. Fact.

For me it's *very* hyper extended legs, double jointed all over the place, and very flexible feet. I'm like a rubber man toy. This is not from training, I seem to have just been born this way. It gives me unique challenges (like closing my legs in fifth position. Like, ever.), but it also gives me the ability to create some really beautiful lines.

The same holds true for Catholicism. My mind and spirit have their own quirks. I love practices like Liturgy of the Hours, the Rosary, and living the liturgical year. I struggle with silent adoration. Turning my mind off is a massive act of will for me, but I have friends who find this to be the most effective way for them to pray. That's ok, we have different paths but the same goal of heaven.

7

Never Done

Do you know what the best dancers do every day? Practice. Ballet can always move forward, steps can get cleaner, deeper, more extended. Every time a ballet is danced it will be a little different, connections between partners can always become deeper, and artistry grow ever more embodied.

Same with your faith. We call the mysteries of the rosary mysteries not because they are ungraspable, but because they can always go deeper and lead us in ever stronger relationship to God.

This contribution is available at <http://underthyroof.blogspot.com/2016/12/how-ballet-has-made-me-better-catholic.html>
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Toting Christ [at God-Haunted Lunatic]



“It is not to remain in a golden ciborium that He comes down each day from Heaven, but to find another Heaven, the Heaven of our soul in which He takes delight.”

~ [St. Thérèse of Lisieux](#)

My bus ride took me west on Lawrence and then up Milwaukee Avenue to [J.F. Morrow and Sons](#). This was some 30 years ago, and I was on a quest for a holy thing.

I'd volunteered to become an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion to the sick, despite being a baby Catholic convert. Frankly, I was amazed I was even eligible – I knew so little, I understood so little. But my parish, St. Thomas of Canterbury in Chicago, had many sick and home-bound members, and our lone priest couldn't possibly visit them all. Moreover, the parish's Uptown boundaries encompassed [Weiss Memorial Hospital](#), so St. Tom's was technically responsible for serving the sacramental needs of the in-patient Catholics there. My pastor needed help; I signed up.

After instructing me in how Communion visits were conducted, Father showed me where he hid the key to the Tabernacle, and then he set me up with the appropriate [book of prayers](#) and a [pyx](#) – that little gold disc of a container that priests and Communion ministers carry Jesus in. The one that my pastor gave me was standard issue – some kind of amalgam with gold plate and a bright religious design painted on the hinged cover. Probably he bought them in bulk – there were numerous ministers to the sick at [St. Tom's](#).

But that just didn't set right with me. After all, I was going to be carrying around the Lord himself, and it was like we'd just met. So, I was thinking I ought to invest in a liturgical [litter](#) worthy of its occupant – or, at least, *more* worthy. These were my do-gooder days, and I had limited discretionary funds, but I scraped together what I could. Then, following the advice of my cradle Catholic friends, I made the trek to J.F. Morrow's – the north side's Catholic goods emporium.

To a neophyte, a place like Morrow's is like an open-air bazaar in Marrakesh or [Samarkand](#) – enticing, exotic, and a sensory overload. There's thuribles and monstrances, copes and candles, and piles of liturgical stuff that clearly had some sacred purpose – but for what? Who knows – and who cares? It was

exhilarating, and my ignorance only added to the thrill. “Somehow, God is mixed up in all this,” I thought to myself. “And I’m a part of it now!”

Which is why I was there in the first place: I wanted to give back to the Church, and visiting the sick, comforting them, praying with them, bringing them the edible God, seemed like a decent place to start.



The clerk directed me to the pyx bins, and I started weighing my funds against my ardent desire to honor the Eucharistic Presence I’d be hauling.

Eventually, I settled on a simple 24K gold-plated design with a plain cross on the cover. It had a slight raise in the bottom, which I figured would make it easier to retrieve the consecrated hosts when administering Holy Communion. Nobody told me that I might’ve also purchased a silken burse with a loop of string to suspend the pyx from around my neck and under my clothing, close to my heart, for I would’ve without a doubt.

The pyx, though, was plenty. I approached the counter, handed over my cash, and left the store with my purchase – a mini-tabernacle – in an ordinary retail bag. For all anyone knew as I got on the bus to head back to Uptown, I could’ve been carrying greeting cards or a pocket calendar. Instead, I felt like I was carrying religious contraband – a little metal box that will soon enough contain Divinity himself. Me, a clueless convert, in possession of this exquisite, rarefied object. I could hardly contain my joy.

And that, in a sense, captured the gist of the astonishing labor I was intending to take up: Carrying the joy of the community’s Eucharistic celebration to those who were prevented from participating themselves, and then releasing it – like 10,000 balloons on a beach, like ticker tape over Broadway, but a 1,000 Broadways. There’s no hoarding involved, only transport – and then emancipation! What a privileged work – a Work of Mercy that [Jesus himself enumerated](#), and thus an endeavor surely associated with spiritual benefits...but only after we discharge our Detainee.

Now, decades later, and worlds away from my [Uptown Catholic beginnings](#), I’m a registered nurse and a nursing instructor – and largely due to my experience with that pyx.

Every Sunday, I’d retrieve the Blessed Sacrament from the church – maybe five, maybe six consecrated Hosts carefully concealed in my circular treasure box – and then, prayer book in hand, I’d trudge over to Weiss to track down the Catholics there. At the time, I was convinced I’d eventually go to seminary, yet, watching the nurses go about their duties, I remember thinking, “If I don’t become a priest, maybe I could do what they do,” for what they did seemed itself pretty priestly. The floor nurses were constantly engaged in things I associated with ordained ministry: advocating, interceding, attending, encouraging, and, most importantly, acting as instruments of healing. They themselves didn’t order the treatments and medications – the docs did that. Even so, it was the nurses who fetched the medications

and brought them to the languishing and the dying and the ones who really needed them.

Eventually, I went to [nursing school](#) and found out all these things for myself, but here's



the funny thing – and the impetus for this little remembrance.

For many years, the healthcare facilities in our area have utilized sophisticated medication management systems to help cut down on errors and tighten up inventory. There are several such systems on the market, but the one that seems to dominate in our region is called... (wait for it)... *Pyxis*[™], put out by [CareFusion](#). I've been getting drugs for my patients and my students' patients from Pyxis dispensing stations for years, but the significance of its name never struck me before – how could I miss it? I couldn't find any evidence that the connection was intentional, and it is true that “pyx” is simply Greek for “receptacle” – so maybe that's the only touchpoint. Still, the Pyxis, just like my golden pyx, holds the substance required for recovery and restoration, and we nurses (like Extraordinary Ministers) return time and time again to replenish our supply of balms for those in our care.

Of course, more than the healing drugs we give our patients, it's the presence and attendance and listening and compassionate care we give them that communicates the healing Christ. In so doing, nurses can be like Mary, carrying the Savior to the bedside inside their very persons – as do we all, particularly when we receive the Lord in the Eucharist. Communicated and sent forth, we're all Marys, we're all pyxes, we're all harboring heaven. All that's left is to let him go.

This contribution is available at <http://godhauntedlunatic.wordpress.com/2016/12/11/toting-christ/>
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A Dollar Shine



“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, ‘Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.’” — Martin Luther King Jr.

After weeks of shopping, hanging ornaments, planning meals, and making arrangements for flights home, Christmas is finally here. The pressure, anxiety, and worry will soon be over. It’s so easy to get so caught up in the hoopla and anticipation that we overlook the most important elements of the holiday.

I was searching for something to write this Christmas that might make this a better Christmas for you and me. , I have to admit that I was so stressed that nothing came to mind. These were the thoughts that went through my mind as I made the first of three trips to the airport on Christmas Eve.

I arrived about 15 minutes before my son, Matthew’s flight was to arrive from Orlando. As I walked through the terminal, I passed an older gentleman in a stocking cap.

As our eyes met we exchanged Merry Christmas greetings. And, as we passed each other, he looked at my shoes and said, “I can put a Christmas shine on those shoes for you.”

Surprised, I replied, “Maybe later, I’ve got to check on my son’s flight.”

I sat down outside the restricted area waiting for his arrival. As I looked up there was a shoe shine stand a few yards away. Standing there was the gentleman with whom I had just exchanged Christmas greetings.

As he spotted me he smiled and asked, “Ready for that Christmas shine now?”

“Sure,” I replied with a smile. “I’ve got about 15 minutes before my son’s flight arrives.

As I climbed up to the seat on his stand, it felt great as I realized that this was the first time I had a chance to sit all day.

“How are you,” I offered making small talk.

“Blessed, I’m blessed,” he replied.

With that he began to tell me that he was just released from the hospital a week ago and this was his first day back on the job. He had heart problems and wasn’t expected to make it.

“It’s a miracle that I am alive today and I am so grateful,” he said in a humble voice. “Now, it’s Christmas Eve. I’m alive, my wife is home cooking, and my children and grandchildren will be at my house on Christmas day. This could have been sad week. But, God has blessed me with a second chance at life and this will be the best Christmas ever!”

As he applied the polish and brushed away at my shoes they began to take on a shine.

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “They look shinier than when I bought them.”

“I’m just getting started,” He replied. “Most shoe shine stands just brush and buff; I’ll give them a spit shine.”

As he continued to apply coats of polish and snap his cloth I asked, “How long have you been shining shoes?”

“53 years,” he responded without missing a beat of the rhythm of the snapping cloth. “I started when I was 9 years old and I’m 62 now. I am proud of the job I do; I think I am the best in the business!”

After a few finishing touches he finished and I agreed that this was the best shoe shine I had ever seen. As I stepped down from the stand our eyes met again.

He questioned me, “Does that look like a \$5 dollar shine to you?”

“No,” I said. “It looks more like a \$20 dollar shine to me,” as I reached for my wallet and handed him a \$20 dollar bill.

“Merry Christmas,” He said humbly.

“And a Blessed Christmas to you, your wife and family too!” I responded as I noticed that my son’s flight had just arrived.

Later that evening, as I stood near the manger in our living room, I began to reflect on our conversation.

I too, have had health scares and was here to enjoy the holiday.

I too, am grateful to be alive.

My wife was cooking, baking and preparing for Christmas Day.

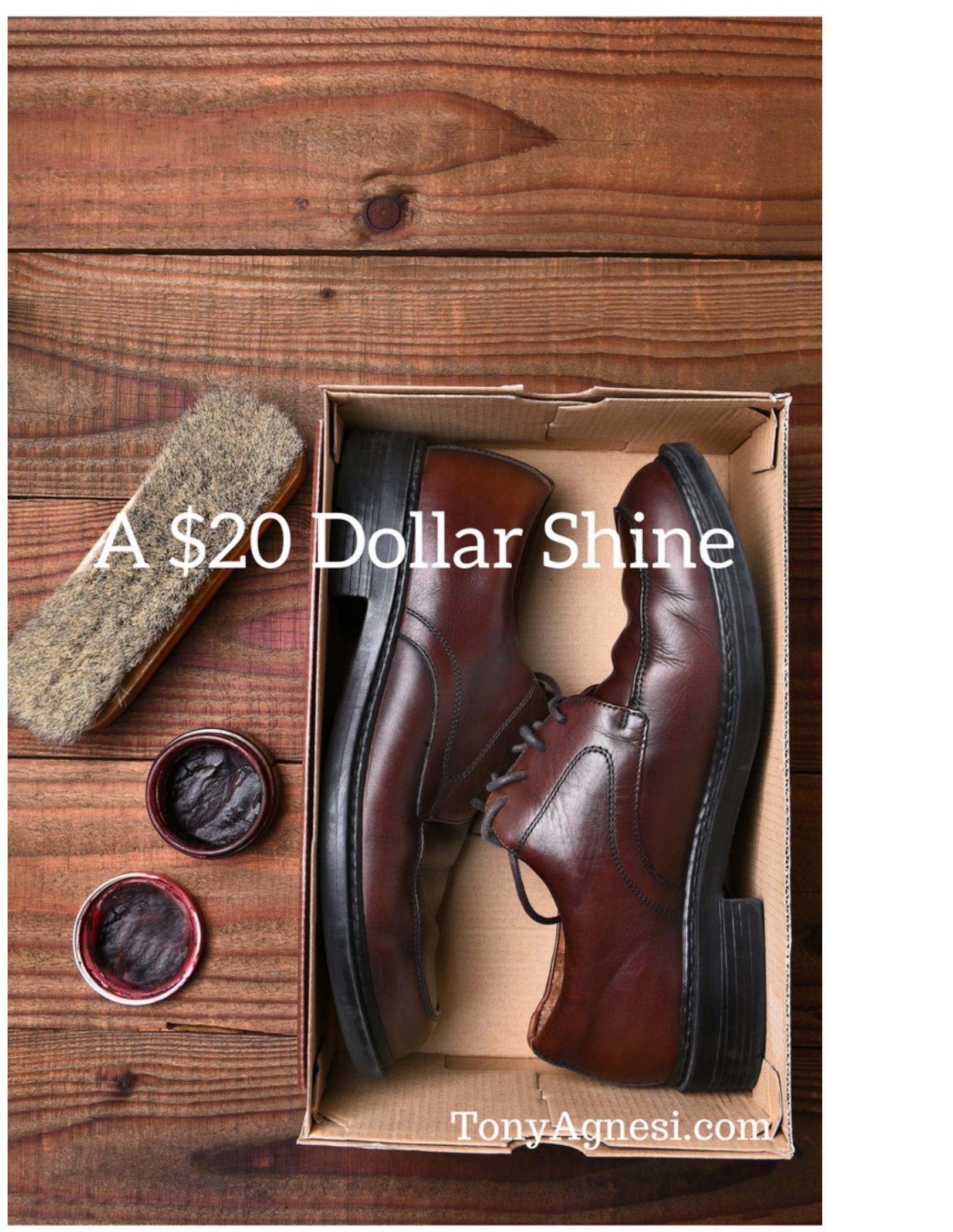
I’ve been at a job I love for 50 years this past January, and just like the shoe shine man, I feel that I am the best at what I do.

As I stood before the manger scene, I realized that his humble gratitude had rubbed off on me. Just as the dust and grime had been rubbed off my shoes. He had shined my heart at the same time he shined my shoes.

As my head bowed, a tear fell from my face onto my newly shined shoes and I could feel God's love shining in my heart.

And, that's my Christmas wish for you, my friend. May you be grateful to be alive, to be spending time with your family. And, be proud of the work you do to support them, whether you are a doctor or a shoe shine man.

May the light of our Savior, Jesus Christ, the light of the world, shine in your heart, like the glow in my heart and the gleam of my \$20 dollar shine.

A top-down photograph of a pair of brown leather shoes in their cardboard box, set against a rustic wooden background. To the left of the box are two small tins of shoe polish and a horsehair brush. The shoes are dark brown with black soles and laces. The text 'A \$20 Dollar Shine' is overlaid in white across the center of the image.

A \$20 Dollar Shine

TonyAgnesi.com

This contribution is available at <http://tonyagnesi.com/2016/12/a-20-dollar-shine/>
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Are You Saved? [at Catholic365]

Forty years ago, when I was still a Protestant, I looked at Catholics with suspicion. Catholicism seemed like a cult that worshiped Mary and idolized statues. I pictured Catholics rattling off memorized prayers as clouds of eerie incense billowed around them, bells rang, and candles illuminated their pagan rituals. Ironically, I now endure similar misconceptions about my Catholic faith from my intelligent, educated, evangelical sister who was a missionary for ten years and has been a pastor, married to a pastor, for the last twenty-five years. Even though she knows I have "accepted Jesus as my Saviour", she is still worried I am not saved.

Mutual Intolerance

The problem is I know exactly how my evangelical sister feels about Catholicism because I felt the very same way; we come from a long line of anti-Catholics. In fact, my Irish Protestant great grandmother only left her house once in her 95th-year to attend her beloved [Orange Parade](#). When a hapless young priest heard about the little old lady who lay dying in his parish and stopped in to pray with her, she sat up and yelled, "How dare you enter my house! Get out!" Even after God intervened in my life and revealed the truth about the Holy Eucharist, the role of Mary, and the joy of a prayer life guided by traditional, contemplative spirituality, I still had to battle these ingrained, negative attitudes to the Catholic faith. My prejudice was not the result of logical, theological study but rather a subconscious dislike of Catholicism which was rooted in the Reformation. Even though the 16th-century Catholic Reformation corrected medieval and Renaissance abuses which upset the Protestant reformers, "an attitude of intolerance to heresy" on both sides continued to reinforce the rift:

In an age of religious intolerance, no other outcome was likely. It can be said quite accurately that the intolerance of Catholics toward Protestants was equaled only by the intolerance of Protestants toward Catholics and surpassed only by the intolerance of the various Protestant groups toward one another. [THE COUNTER REFORMATION](#)

This rift exists today among some contemporary extremists who actually hate Catholics, like those who run websites with titles like, "[Hail Mary! Hail Satan! Catholicism, Mother of Harlots](#)".

However, most Protestants we come in contact with simply question if Catholics are Christians, challenging our faith with questions like:

- Have you accepted Christ as your Lord and Saviour?
- Are you saved?
- Have you been born again?
- Are you filled with the Holy Spirit?

The average Catholic is reduced to silence with these strangely worded questions and cannot adequately explain their faith and spirituality in terms a Protestant can understand and accept. These simple differences in culture and vocabulary are another reason Protestants and Catholics often do not connect with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Are You Saved?

I am embarrassed to admit it but I have often attended ecumenical conferences and tucked my crucifix and medal under my shirt so the Protestants would not identify me as a Catholic. If you also feel intimidated by Protestants who question whether you are saved, consider the words you utter at every Mass where you proclaim Christ as your Saviour:

PART OF THE MASS

A: We proclaim your death, O Lord,
and profess your Resurrection until you come again.

B: When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord,
until you come again.

C: Save us, Saviour of the world, for, by your Cross and Resurrection, you have set us free.

Remember, Catholicism is, most importantly, an experiential faith, a living relationship with Christ. A Catholic is not a person who merely accumulates intellectual knowledge about God nor simply fulfills tradition and the letter of the law. Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have repeatedly emphasized that Christianity is an encounter with Jesus.

Many people perceive Christianity as something institutional — rather than as an encounter with Christ — which explains why they don't see it as a source of joy. [Pope Benedict XVI](#)

The evangelization of the person and of human communities depends totally on this encounter with Jesus Christ. [Pope Benedict XVI](#)

We must always have the courage and the joy of proposing, with respect, an encounter with Christ, and being heralds of his Gospel. Jesus came amongst us to show us the way of salvation and he entrusted to us the mission to make it known to all to the ends of the earth. [Pope Francis](#)

Yet, somehow we mistakenly believe the phrase “a personal relationship with Jesus” is a Protestant slogan even though it is proclaimed right in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The following excerpt clearly states the importance of a personal relationship with God in the lives of Roman Catholics.

[A Personal Relationship with God \(2558\)](#)

The Church professes faith in the Apostles Creed (Part One) and celebrates faith in sacramental liturgy (Part Two) so the faithful might conform to God's will in the Ten Commandments (Part Three). To believe, celebrate, and live this mystery demands a personal relationship with the living God through prayer (Part Four). ”Prayer is a surge of the heart, a simple look toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy” (St. Therese of Lisieux).

[From the Covenant with the Trinity \(2564-2565\)](#)

Christian prayer is a Covenant relationship in Christ, springing from the Spirit and ourselves and directed toward the Father in union with Christ's human will.

Prayer is the living relationship of the children with the Father, Son, and Spirit. The Kingdom is "the union of the entire Holy Trinity with the whole human spirit" (St. Gregory of Nazianzus). Prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the Trinity.

Pope Francis Reached out to Evangelicals

Recently, Pope Francis reached out to evangelicals in August 2015 by becoming the [first pontiff to visit a Pentecostal church](#), the Evangelical Church of Reconciliation now under construction in Caserta. The pope apologized for the Catholic persecution of Pentecostals during Italy's fascist regime, explaining there can now be unity in diversity within Christianity.

"Among those who persecuted and denounced Pentecostals, almost as if they were crazy people trying to ruin the race, there were also Catholics," he said. "I am the pastor of Catholics, and I ask your forgiveness for those Catholic brothers and sisters who didn't know and were tempted by the devil."

This statement was recorded on a smartphone for Tony Palmer, who is a bishop in a Protestant church who had it shown at an Evangelical/Pentecostal conference hosted by Kenneth Copeland Ministries. The short video message was addressed to all Christians who are "Born Again", including American Pentecostals, Charismatics, Evangelicals, Baptists and other Bible-based Christians.

Pope Francis made a heartfelt plea for Born Again Christians to recognize Catholic Christians as spiritual brothers and sisters. It was an appeal to acknowledge Catholics as Christians and to work together in unity. In the video, the pope promised to pray for America's Born-Again Christians and he blessed them. Then, Pope Francis asked Protestants to pray for him.

Perfecting Only in Unity

It is time to forgive and to seek forgiveness for ancient feuds rooted in the Reformation. It is time to listen to each other without reacting to differences in vocabulary and culture. It is time to let go of any defensive attitudes without watering down the truths of our Catholic faith, like the role of Mary, the reality of the Real Presence in the Eucharist and the importance of the Church. It is time to realize we *are* "saved and in the process of being saved through the Sacraments. Only then can Christ unify His people and fulfill His mission on earth through us. We must examine our own denominational prejudices in the Light of Truth and take Christ's prayer for unity at the Last Supper to heart:

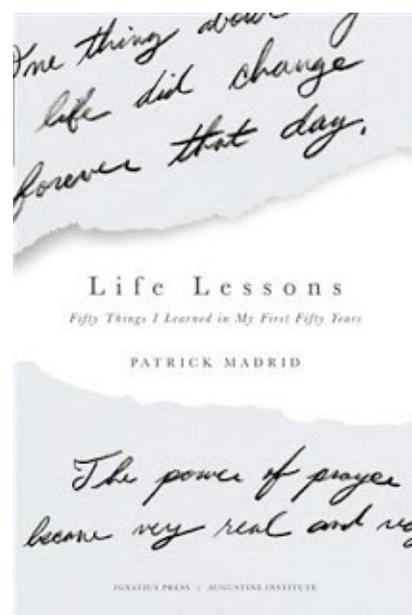
that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.
John 17: 21-23

This contribution is available at <http://www.catholic365.com/article/5781/are-you-saved-.html>
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Life Lessons [at Do Not Be Anxious]

*God loves you just the way you are,
but he loves you too much to let you stay that way*
-- Patrick Madrid

A few years back I wrote a letter to one of my Godchildren on his graduation from college. I offered him a handful of lessons I had learned in life, in hopes he might not have to learn them the hard way, as I did, and also in hopes he might not forget some of the more important lessons his parents had taught him --- as I did.



For every good lesson learned, there must be a good teacher. For most of us, that good teacher was our parents, and for some particular lessons perhaps it was God Himself, through His Spirit or His Word. Patrick Madrid doesn't focus on the teacher of lessons in this book --- although he does imply that in some cases he thought he needed no teacher at all (as do many young people, even today). He did learn, however, how foolish a man is who has himself for a teacher.

Patrick gives 50 examples of the lessons he learned in life, and not a few the hard way. In some cases he admits how his ego (or sometimes his youth) prevented him from seeing matters clearly. And in some cases, he admits how he hurt people because of his vain stupidity. But through his words he explains clearly how and what he learned, and why it was an important lesson.

I cried as I read some of Patrick's stories, because they were my stories. I cried in happiness remembering how I learned similar lessons, and then I cried in sadness as I recalled the people that I had hurt along the way, and how stupid I was in my youth. Life is a lesson.

For old people, this is a book of remembrances; for the young it will give pause and (hopefully) reflection. And for the very young, many thoughts here might be totally new, and perhaps this book can serve as a teacher for them. It would be a good one.

This contribution is available at <http://do-not-be-anxious.blogspot.com/2016/12/review-life-lessons.html>
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Executed for Refusing to Say "Yes" [at It Makes Sense to Me]

IT MAKES SENSE TO ME By Larry Peterson

The pages of Catholic/Christian history are filled with countless names of those who came from virtual anonymity and proceeded to leave an indelible mark in our lives. St. Teresa of Calcutta is a prime example. Many have also reached the eternal heights of spiritual greatness but are not so well known. Meet Franz Jagerstatter.



Franz was born in Austria in 1907. His father was killed in World War I and when Franz was around eight years old, his mom married Heinrich Jagerstatter who adopted young Franz, giving him his name.

Franz received a basic education in the local schools and excelled in reading and writing. He learned religion from his maternal grandmother and would read the Bible and other religious works. He managed to develop a faith which nestled itself securely into his soul. As Franz grew older and wiser his faith grew right along with him.

In 1933, Franz, inherited his adopted father's farm. He then met Franziska Schwaninger, a deeply religious Catholic woman, and they fell in love. They were married Holy Thursday, 1936, and after the ceremony proceeded on a pilgrimage to Rome. This is also when Franz's spiritual life became his primary focus in all things.

Now possessing a deeply imbedded faith and love of Jesus, he soon was serving as a sexton at his local parish. He and Franziska would have three daughters and he began to live his life true to his faith and to Jesus Christ. He would no longer deviate from things that were "not right". Some perceived him as "overly pious".

He stopped going to taverns because, as a defender of truth, he was always getting into arguments about Nazism and wanted to avoid that. He stopped accepting donations he received as the church sexton and gave the money to the needy even though he and his growing family were poor too. Even though some folks mocked him, he was determined to do “what was right”.

In 1938, German soldiers began moving into Austria. Immediately, they began implementing the Nazification of the once peaceful nation. The "[Anschluss](#)", which was the creation of a German-Austrian State, was put to a vote in Franz's village and he was the only one in his town to vote “no”. The authorities rejected his vote and claimed the vote was unanimous. However, Franz was now under watch by the Nazis.

It did not matter to Franz. He knew he must do the right thing and remained openly anti-Nazi. He joined the [Third Order of St. Francis](#) and began serving as a sacristan at the local parish. He managed to get several exemptions from military service. Time was not to be Franz's friend.

In 1940, when he was 33, Franz was conscripted into the German army. He finished basic training but managed to stay out of the active service because he qualified for an exemption given to farmers. Back home he began to evaluate the morality of war and even discussed the subject with his bishop. His bishop did not encourage Franz.

And so it was that on February 23, 1943, Franz Jagerstatter was called to active duty. He and Franziska now had three daughters, the oldest only six. Franz stood strong and refused to fight for the godless, Third Reich. He declared himself a "[conscientious objector](#)" and offered to serve as a paramedic. He was ignored. A priest from his town came to talk him into serving but he refused. He was immediately put in prison.

Against all advice to stop resisting, Franz persisted in his opposition to the Nazis. He was told by his spiritual advisors that he had an obligation to his family to protect his life. He was told that he was required morally to obey the “legitimate” authorities. A friend told him, “Just say yes. You don't even have to shoot straight. But take the oath.” Franz rejected all arguments. Atheistic Nazism could not be supported. He was determined to do the “right thing”.

Franz wrote, *“Everyone tells me, of course, that I should not do what I am doing because of the danger of death. I believe it is better to sacrifice one's life right away than to place oneself in the grave danger of committing sin and then dying.”*

Franz Jagerstatter held fast to his principles. On July 6, 1943, he was tried and sentenced to death. On August 9, 1943, he was executed by guillotine at Brandenburg-Gorden prison. He was 36 years old.

Franz Jagerstatter led an obscure life and his death was no different. But a priest by the name of Father Jochmann spoke to Franz right before his execution. He said later that Franz was the only saint he had ever met.

Eventually, Franz story weaved its way to the Vatican and came before Pope Benedict XVI. In June of 2007, the Holy Father issued an [apostolic exhortation](#) declaring Franz a martyr. On October 27, 2007, Franz Jagerstatter was beatified by Cardinal Jose Martins in Linz, Austria.

Franz believed that Jesus wanted him to do the “right thing”. He even gave his life to do it. He is known as the patron of “conscientious objectors”.

Blessed Franz Jagerstatter, please pray for us.

*This article appeared in

[Aleteia](#)

on October 19, 2016

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This contribution is available at <http://slipperywillie.blogspot.com/2016/09/executed-for-refusing-to-say-yes.html>
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A baby awakens, and we, with him [at Peace Garden Passage]

The other day, I glimpsed an image of the first baby of our oldest godchild; a girl — woman now — with whom we've been separated by miles and years. And yet what a beautiful sight to behold, this new child that she had helped bring into the world. It seemed not so very long ago that she was a little girl, visiting us in our small first home, eager to peek at our new babe. Her own child came into this world the same month as our firstborn, the same month we celebrate Jesus' birth.

I was struck by his open eyes, which seemed to be searching hard, and asking deep questions. Who am I? Where am I? What is this world in which I find myself?

We can't imagine it; none of our memories go back that far. It's hard to conceive that we begin knowing just the warmth of our mother's wombs. It must be an incredible undertaking for the brain to suddenly have so much stimuli to process. Slowly is how we must unfold into this big world.

Seeing that new baby's eyes looking at the world, so innocent but so wise at the same time, brought back memories of my own babies looking into my eyes in that same searching way.



This is my middle son, Adam, one of my most thoughtful kids. He takes in the world with much discernment. He does now, and he did then. I find the way he is studying my face so beautiful. There is a connection here that remains today. I feel blessed by it.

And I can't help but think of Jesus. Though he was God, he was also fully human. It's nearly impossible to comprehend. The other day, one of my older kids was trying to convince me that if she missed Christmas Mass, Jesus wouldn't care. "He's just a baby," she said, "so what does it matter?"

Deep down, she knows. But she thought she'd try. Maybe she just wanted to see what I'd say. Maybe she was testing me.

"He is just a baby, yes, but he is also the savior of the world!" I responded. "A savior who aches to feel you near him. He is just a baby, but *not just any* baby."

Later, I was thinking about our goddaughter's baby, and about baby Jesus; about the awakening that happens with bright eyes shining, looking, wondering. When the eyes of the newborn pop open, so alert, it is a beautiful, magical, wondrous time. It's as if the baby is trying to take in everything. Suddenly, everything has changed. They are fully in our world now and there is so much to see! It's like they are trying to make up for lost time.

As the mother who birthed each of our five children, I don't know if I was as reflective about this process as I am now that I'm not just hours from the most intense experiences of my life. Seeing it all from a distance, I am able to revel anew in the remembrance and reality of the awakening of a child in those first hours after birth. I think of Jesus, wide-eyed and wondering. What did his parents think as he looked at them for the first time? After all, they already knew how special he was; that he had come into the world with a mission unlike any other before, or after.

"She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus," the angel Gabriel had said to Joseph in his prophetic dream just months before, "because he will save his people from their sins."

His people. That can only mean one thing. That *he* is God.

And that's it — that's why this baby wants us near. Without us coming near to him, he cannot fulfill his purpose. So yes, dear child of mine, he is but a baby, and yet he is so much more. You know that, and someday, I pray, you will embrace it. For now, it's okay to just accept his littleness and draw near, and not think so much about the overwhelming reality of it all.

In the middle of my own pondering about how Jesus, like our goddaughter's new baby and like our own children, awaken to this world slowly, with great wonder in their eyes, I can't help but think about our own awakenings that happen every day. And how, without God, we could never make sense of this world. We would continue searching but rather than with light in our eyes, our eyes would reflect only a hopeless vacancy. It is because of the light, reflected in part and symbolically by the Star above, that we can begin to make sense of things, and slowly find our own purpose in this world, and the next.

The other day on Facebook, I asked a simple question: *What is the song on your heart this Christmas season?* A lot of titles of great tunes came back, but this one, new to me, drew me in. In listening, might you be seized with the wonder of this time of year, and the miracles about to unfold.

When Jesus, the babe, awakens, we awaken with him. May our awakening be met with a world full of hope that we ourselves have helped unleash.



And speaking of...I kept the tree fairly bare, hoping the kids would find joy in decorating it themselves, and over the weekend, our youngest and his friend took up the task. Our tree is now, as Nick says, “ornamented.” Thank you guys! It looks great!

Q4U: To what have you awakened this Advent?

This contribution is available at <http://roxanesalonen.com/2016/12/a-baby-awakens-and-we-with-him/>
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Are You the One Who is To Come?

December 12, 2016 by [Susan Stabile](#)

Yesterday was the final day of the weekend Women's Advent Retreat I gave at the Jesuit Retreat House in OshKosh. There were fifty-seven women in attendance, and it was a wonderful, grace-filled weekend. I am filled with gratitude.

The final time I spoke to the group was when I delivered a reflection on the readings at our Mass on Sunday. Yesterday's Gospel was Matthew's account of the imprisoned John the Baptist sending his disciples to Jesus to ask "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another." The following summarizes a part of what I shared.

When I listen to that Gospel, I ask myself: What was it like for John between the time he was arrested and the point at which he is beheaded?

John wasn't sitting in some swanky minimum security prison being served three meals a day and getting exercise. He was likely in a dark and dank cell, perhaps chained, being served unappetizing and perhaps even rotten food. No toilet, no sink, guards perhaps jeering at him during periods when they were bored.

As he sat, day after day and week after week (we are not told how long John was imprisoned), he must have had questions and doubts. And so he sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?" suggesting at least some uncertainty.

I can picture John in his prison cell, worn and weary. Perhaps he knows that he will soon come to his death. I can imagine him asking himself: "Did my life and witness have meaning?...Am I in jail about to die for a good reason?" I can imagine him wondering if his mission had been worth dying for...if it had all been for naught... if he had been abandoned by God.

But when his disciples question Jesus, seeking some assurance for John, Jesus doesn't provide quick and easy solace. How easy it would have been to console a dying man, for Jesus to instruct John's disciples, "Tell John it's all cool. He backed the right horse. Everything is copacetic."

Instead, Jesus tells them "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them."

In other words, draw your own conclusions. Don't take it on my say-so. Don't believe in me because of who I say I am. Rather, judge for yourself based on what you know of me and my work.

Speaking of this passage, Pope Benedict wrote

The task set before the Baptist as he lay in prison was to become blessed by this unquestioning acceptance of God's obscure will; to reach the point of asking no further for external, visible, unequivocal clarity, but instead of discovering God precisely in the darkness of this world and of his own life, and thus becoming profoundly blessed. John even in his prison cell had to respond once

again and anew to his own call for metanoia or a change of mentality, in order that he might recognize God in the night in which all things earthly exist.

Most of us won't be imprisoned for our preaching of the Gospel. But, we do each suffer dark moments, fearful moments, and, thus, face the same challenge "of discovering God precisely in the darkness of this world and of [our] own [lives]."

And when we do that, we know (in the words of the first reading from Isaiah) that however bad things may look, "The desert and the parched land will exult" and we will see "the splendor of our God." The eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf cleared, the lame will leap and the tongue of the mute will sing. As the second reading says "The Coming of the Lord is at hand."

This contribution is available at <http://susanjoan.wordpress.com/2016/12/12/are-you-the-one-who-is-to-come-3/>
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What was Mary feeling one week before giving birth to Jesus?

Historically, in the Liturgical Calendar, December 18 (yesterday) is the *Expectation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. Although this feast is no longer officially in the liturgical calendar, many faithful Catholics in the Latin Church still honor the day.

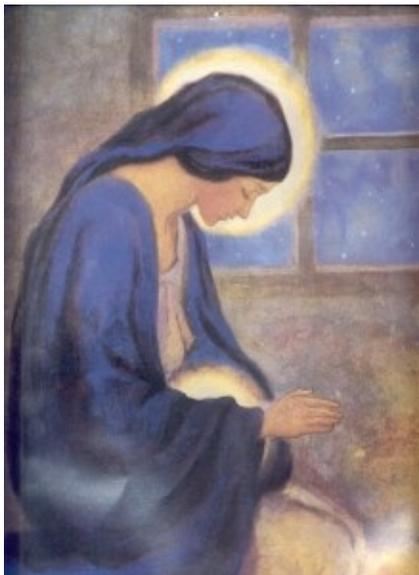
The *Expectation of the Blessed Virgin Mary* is the feast anticipating the coming of Jesus Christ. In the Spanish Catholic Church, it is still a very popular feast. To read more about it, I encourage you to visit [Catholic Encyclopedia – New Advent](#).

Trying to understand what the Blessed Virgin Mary was feeling one week before giving birth to Jesus is difficult since nothing about her thoughts have been revealed to us in the Sacred Scriptures. At this point, it's pure speculation at best. We know what St. Luke tells us in Chapter 2 of his Gospel, however, we don't know much more than this account.

Was it difficult on Mary to be away from her family and *her mother* during this time? Even though the birth of Jesus was miraculous, as was his conception, what was Mary feeling? Did she know what was to occur? Was she ready for it? Did she think she would be a good mother? Was she fearful in any way? Did she really completely trust the will of God?

Knowing what we do know about the Blessed Virgin Mary, her own Immaculate Conception, and the Annunciation, tells us that she did completely put her *trust* in God, just as she had done nine months prior. Mary is the great sign of perfect *faith* and *joy* for us, all the time, but especially during the Advent.

Not only is she the *Theotokos* (*God-Bearer*), she is also now our Mother and Advocate. Just as she brought forth Jesus into the world, she longs to bring us closer to Him today, most especially during this Advent season when we await his arrival as a little child.



We may not know completely what Mary was feeling one week before the birth of Christ, but below are ten quotes from mothers sharing what they were feeling one week prior to having their child(ren) –

I was always excited awaiting the birth of our four children. We never had any idea if we were going to welcome a girl or a boy– that always added to the excitement! Our fourth child was to be a Christmas baby and was born late on December 22nd after a very long trying birth. I was very excited to go home with the new baby on Christmas Eve day to share the wonderful present that God had given us with the other children. (We were gifted four babies in less than 3 1/2 years!). – Kathy

I was feeling Joy, happiness and I was very excited to see the little faces of my babies. And the most important thing that they were healthy!! And since the first moment that I knew I was pregnant I felt very blessed!!! – Vanessa

The week leading up my son's birth was filled with excitement, joy and fear. Excited to finally see and hold the boy I'd come to love with a depth I've only felt for my children. Joy and wonder for the miracle it was that my flesh was the perfect home for his creation. And utter fear that I wouldn't have all the answers or wherewithal to handle all that may come. Thankfully, God was by side through it all and faithfully remains my guide and source of strength lighting my path. – Lissa

Well I was becoming anxious since my son was late in arriving. I cleaned house continuously and re-webbed my lawn chairs. I did anything to occupy myself. – Barbara

As my due date drew closer, the anticipation grew in my family and me. I was anxious to meet this little one but at the same time there was so much to do still. My body was tired but my brain was on a roll. At the same time there was a certain tranquility that everything was going to be ok because I was surrounded with people that loved us. – Ann Marie

A week before the birth of my daughter, I kept wondering what she'd look like. What her life would be like. What kind of world she was entering. And afraid–afraid that all the books I had read wouldn't mean anything when she made her appearance! – Marcella

One week before giving birth, I felt so many emotions, including excitement, joy, anxiety, fear and anticipation. I could not wait to experience the day of bringing this new life into the world, wondering what her little features looked liked and whom she resembled in those features. I could not begin to explain the amount of love I had for this tiny little person I had never met yet, and I was waiting for the day I could hold her. Each day was filled with suspense in that last week of wondering... could this be the day she is here? – Michele

Within 5 years of marriage, my husband and I had 3 children. While each pregnancy was vastly different, the feeling I had one week prior to giving birth was always the same; I couldn't wait. I was anxious and excited to finally get to see and hold my child, a child I already intimately knew and loved more than words could ever express. Every day just prior to giving birth felt like an eternity, because I knew the moment that I was going to get to kiss and meet my child face to face was drawing ever closer. – Mary

“I felt the anticipation of longing to meet my new son, along with fear of the unknown if I'd be a worthy mom. Also thankful for the gift God gave me!” – Dena

“One week before I gave birth to my daughter, I was feeling super excited to hold this little person who had been growing inside of me. I was thrilled to hear her little cry, smell her, and to see her beautiful face. Also, I was feeling nervous for the labor and delivery part especially because I had

her stories from so many other women. I just felt that I wanted to be the best Mommy to my baby girl who I had already fallen in love with.” – Carla



Motherhood is vitally important for the growth of civilization. Thanks to the women above for hearing the call to be Mothers. If you are Mom and would like to share your experience of what you were feeling one week before giving birth, please do so in the comment box below. We would love to read and learn from them.

This contribution is available at <http://tomperna.org/2016/12/19/mondays-with-mary-what-was-mary-feeling-one-week-before-giving-birth-to-jesus/>
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Visiting Hombound Elder Catholics [at It Makes Sense to Me]

IT MAKES SENSE TO ME

By Larry Peterson

I have been an EMHC (Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion) for over 20 years. I have had the honor and privilege of bringing Holy Communion to many people in many places: hospitals, nursing homes, hospice centers, assisted living facilities, and, of course, to the homebound. I love being part of this ministry and it has brought me in touch with some amazing people who have lived their Catholic lives quietly, faithfully and without fanfare or notoriety.

Most of those I visit are Elder-Catholics. These are the Catholic faithful who have, throughout their lives, supported their church, been active in various ministries and carried on the faith that was and still is, part of their very being. Some were born into the faith and it was nurtured in them by their parents and oftentimes by nuns, brothers, priests and Catholic laypersons. They in turn have passed it on to their own children. Some found the faith as adults and converted. (I so admire those people.) And so, as is the way of things, the Church continues.

I would like to share a story about one of these people. His name is John. I have been bringing Holy Communion to John every Sunday for a little more than a year. He is 90 years old, an Army veteran, spent almost 30 years in the Far-East and was married for 60 years. His wife, Mary, passed away several years ago. He loved her dearly and misses her greatly. John is not delusional, or suffering from dementia or anything like that. His mind is sharp and clear. Physically, John is deaf (hearing aids help a tiny bit) and wheelchair bound.

When I arrive at his front door, I push the doorbell. I hear a chime, he does not. Inside, several strobe lights begin to flash notifying him someone is at the door. He is expecting me and the front door is unlocked. I walk in and he gives out a big, "Hey, hey, good morning." I more or less holler back, "Hey John, how you doing today?" He is always wearing a smile. He says, "Well, I'm still here." We both laugh.

John is facing a dilemma. He picks up the newspaper from a few days before and points to a story. "Have you gotten any feedback on this?" I look at the paper and he has it opened to an article dealing with the church's newly revised guidelines on

[cremation](#)

. I shrug and tell him I have not. He says, "I have a problem and maybe you can help me out. I need some guidance."

I am not "Father Larry" or "Deacon Larry" ..I'm just Larry. I immediately feel a bit insecure because I do not like telling folks what they should or should not do when it comes to their personal faith issues. I quietly ask the Holy Spirit to quickly help me out. Then I say, "I'll try, John. But I may not be able to. I will go to Father Anthony and ask him if necessary."

Being part of this ministry can have unexpected rewards. God was about to bless me with a glimpse into the hearts of two Catholics, a man and a woman, people of faith who married in the faith and lived it and who shared a love that did not die upon the death of one--rather, it simply continued and still existed. John says to me, "You know, I am upset about this article. It says we Catholics must bury the ashes of loved ones in sacred ground."

I said, "That isn't anything new. Some folks are scattering ashes over the Gulf of Mexico or off mountaintops or sharing them among family members. Those kinds of things are not approved of."

Look", he says. "I have Mary's ashes here with me. I talk to her everyday. I'm all alone and I feel she never really left and I get such comfort from that. Do I have to get her over to the cemetery?"

I'm looking at him and tears are filling his eyes. He wants to be a GOOD Catholic man and he loves his wife and wants to be loyal to her. He will give her up if the Church requires it even though the pain he will feel is unimaginable. It did not matter. He would be true to his faith no matter what. I was looking at a man who would have gladly embraced a martyr's crown if he had been called upon to do so.

I knew that cremated remains are supposed to be kept intact and placed in a proper vessel. Nervously I began to answer but he continued. "I have a spot down at the VA for both of us. I made arrangements with the funeral home and when I pass they are going to take us together down to the VA and bury us next to each other."

I breathed a sigh of great relief. Casting doubt to the wind I told him, "John, that is great. She can stay here with you. She is encased in a vessel and is scheduled for burial. You will make the trip to the VA together. Don't worry about a thing."

I will never forget the smile that broke out across his face. I'm not sure if I gave him proper 'guidance'. No matter, in this case I am sure the Holy Spirit helped me out. I will check with the priest when I see him.

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Mary and Adam, grace and sin [at walk the way]

Today is the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. By the grace of God, Mary was free from sin from the moment of conception in the womb of Saint Ann. So today we celebrate that original sin had no power over her.

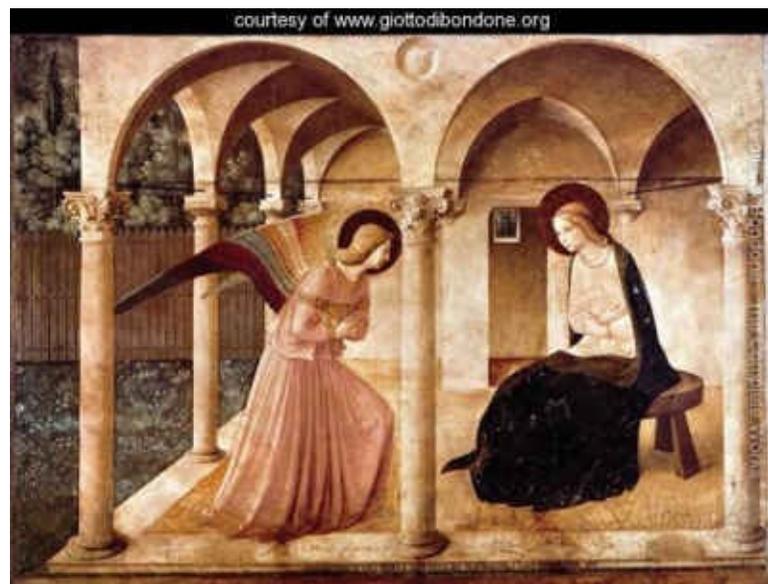
In her commentary in *Give Us This Day*, Benedictine Sister Jeana Visel, writes:

In short, we are free, but we are supposed to be opposed to evil. The fact that we tend to give in to evil when we ought to choose good is the basic conflict driving the redemption story.

Mary was freed from this tendency to give in to evil.

But, today's Gospel may confuse some of us, for it speaks of the annunciation of Mary when Jesus was conceived in her womb.

There is an amazing mural by Giotto of the Annunciation in the Dominican convent of San Marcos in Florence. I knew it was there, but walking up to the former dormitory on the second floor, I was astounded as I turned the corner and saw the image at the top of the stairs. Spell-bound, I remained there in awe. Giotto had captured the moment when God became flesh in Mary.



Doing a little internet search this morning I came across a painting of Giotto of the Annunciation which is strikingly similar, but includes Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden of Eden.



As I prayed, I recalled the difference between Adam and Eve in the first reading today and the Gospel of the Annunciation.

Adam and Eve hid themselves. Sin hides. When we sin, we separate ourselves from God and so we need the security of being hidden – in the bushes or in darkness.

But Mary is there in the open, almost as if she were waiting for the angel. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord.” Here I am, Lord. I am here to serve you.

But Adam and Eve try to explain away their sin by refusing to take responsibility. Adam blames Eve, who in turn blames the serpent.

Mary takes responsibility. “Be it done to me according to your word.” I am willing to take on this, even though I do not know all the implications.

This is what grace is. Grace frees us from darkness and opens us to the work of God in the light of day. Grace helps us respond in love to God’s call and frees us from blaming others.

Sin moves us into ourselves, but in a self-protective way that moves us to blame others. Grace opens ourselves to become instruments of God’s love, not blaming others but cooperating in God’s work of salvation.

So today we can reflect on the mystery of the immaculate conception of Mary, preserving her from sin. But it is also a time to reflect and thank God for the grace that moves us out of the darkness of sin, out of all attempts to close in on ourselves and opens us to the angels that call us to bring the saving power of the Incarnate God to a world in darkness.

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Checklist... or Grace Missed? [at Theologyisaverb]

Checklist..



OR GRACE MISSED?

-
1. WAKE UP
 2. COFFEE
 3. THE REST...

Theologyisaverb.com

This post begins with a confession of sorts. I am a checklist enthusiast. With each item and chore checked off, comes a corresponding feeling of accomplishment. Not to mention that should I neglect to make a list, I am prone to amble aimlessly as a boat without a rudder. Advent is a particular challenge in that my list is always a work in the making and there never seems to be enough hours in the day to complete each of these necessities. Yet are each of these items REALLY necessary?

One of the most common expressions heard in parish ministry when an innovative thought is floated or an old one reevaluated, is that “We have ALWAYS done it this way!” When in truth, we truly haven’t. This goes for our own individual or family traditions. Advent is a perfect time to consider the things we do that bring us closer to Christ and those that merely busy us. Some of the greatest gifts of grace I have received were those never planned or even conceived. Impromptu conversations that I begrudgingly entered, car mishaps and vacation disasters, delayed or rescheduled appointments..all within God’s purview and grace. Easier perhaps in hindsight..but how do we see this in the moment?

If I may, I offer this as a guide for a receptive heart and renewed perspective...

Time with our Father: Listening. Have we provided quiet time for God to speak to our hearts as we go about our day?

Time spent with the Word: It needn't be an entire Gospel but simply a short passage that is a seed for later reflection and growth. Can we spare 5-10 minutes?

Meet Christ in your time spent with others: Do something unexpected for someone else, or say yes to an invitation to visit someone who is sick, lonely, or troubled. I can tell you of the blessings in doing so, but the surprise that awaits is far better!

Pray: Petition for help with all of the other things that you would like to complete each day. Ask for direction for those things that you can let go and are unneeded. Don't be afraid to make a new tradition, or say no to something that has become unfruitful. Sometimes we have to say no to one thing in order to be free to say yes to another!

St. Ignatius describes the process of discernment as “motions of the soul”. In order to decide between competing ‘goods’ (good vs a greater good) we must be prayerful, and attentive to the Spirit. Therefore discernment isn't a choice between good or bad but a better choice that will bring us into a fuller more intimate relationship with Christ. And because of the persuading case that can usually be made for either choice, this decision may be a challenging and be met with resistance. Yet, again some of the hardest battles fought have brought great spiritual rewards.

With this, I have made a few changes to my own checklist. Items that might be expected but not essential will be left off, trusting that God will give me the courage to explain when needed. Other desired tasks that are preempted by more immediate concerns will indeed wait till another day. There is such peace that comes from putting down or relinquishing a “to do” as an obligation and instead choosing to pick up and carry each as a grace. And never alone..for when we invite God into our busyness, he shares the load.

With Advent Grace,



Reflect: What is on your checklist today? Are you willing to put aside your list to accept His?

This contribution is available at <http://theologyisaverb.com/2016/12/12/checklist-or-grace-missed/>
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Those Vows, Those Words ~ 20 Years of Marriage & Protecting the Holy Innocents of Today [at Campfires and Cleats]

So...us, twenty years ago today.

And darn if those weren't the fastest two decades of our lives.



Blink and it's 2016.

And by the way, the you-haven't-changed-a-bit thing?

Thanks, but there are these middle aged, *different looking people* staring back from the mirror's reflection these days.

You're too kind though. 😊

And thank God that we took our vows as a sacrament, because, well, mercy, patience, partnership and never-giving-up.

come to life for us countless times.

When choosing readings, I felt it a bit overdone, overused,

one of those everyone seems to have at their masses too...

especially as we tied the knot in the midst of a three year span of time where

seemingly all our friends were as well.

It was wedding mass after wedding mass and 1 Corinthians 13 seemed to get, well, I hate to say it, but.....*old*.

I know it is due in large part to

the words spoken at our mass within the readings

and

the fact that we were married within our Catholic faith

that has kept us, from not throwing in the towel.

That, and the fact, that we do actually still like each other.

The essence of patience, kindness,

not being envious, proud or boastful, as

St Paul explained the meaning of "love" allllll those years ago....?

Well, smart man, that St Paul.

Other readings at our mass? They honored defenseless babes

mercilessly and cruelly slaughtered that day,

three days after the birth of our Savior.

It was actually a convenient twist of availability

on the part of the church and the catering hall, that we were married

on the Saturday between Christmas and New Year's,

on the day that we Catholics deem the Feast of the Holy Innocents.

Oh, back then, I casually recognized Herod's savagery in the Gospel readings;

I absolutely did.

But did I truly ever feel the depth of compassion and remorse and,

well, anger...that I should have, that we *all* should have?

No.

These were words that I read or listened to.

These were actions of a small - minded, threatened ruler two thousand years ago.

I'm ashamed to say..... they were just words.

Not until three years later, when I lost my own baby...my first...through

the nightmare of miscarriage, did the horror of those sweet babies' mass killings

genuinely become clear to me.....

In twenty years, given the ups, downs, smiles, tears,

losses, triumphs and, of course, forced selflessness

that comes with motherhood,

I hope I've gotten better at getting out of my own way and

recognizing the important, unseen things of life.

A look back in time, through the lens of experience and clarity

shows me that starting our life together on this day,

the Feast of the Holy Innocents, was 'in the plan.'

Our family feels called to honor the unprotected of two thousand years ago,

on the day we were married,

by working as productively as possible to protect the preborn of today.

By raising awareness and marching on Washington protesting Roe v Wade,

by providing tangible help at our local Birthright,

by doing whatever is needed to defend the babies of today,

who cannot defend themselves

from the evil of abortion just as the innocents of the past

were defenseless against Herod.



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quickly and easily so we can be in touch regularly!



This post contains amazon affiliate links....

If you are shopping at amazon this Christmas season,

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THANK YOU!

Until next time,

This contribution is available at <http://campfiresandcleats.blogspot.com/2016/12/those-vows-those-words-20-years-of.html>
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Our powerless Jesus

Jesus came as a refugee baby. He lived as a religious minority, was distrusted and harassed by authorities and was executed by the state.

If this were a movie made in the 21st century there would be some grand revenge sequel, but instead what we get is a quiet resurrection, 40 days spent eating with friends, and a departure which, while dramatic, leaves his mission in the hands of disciples of dubious capability.

Jesus came to the powerless, and he stayed powerless, at least in the eyes of the world. Maybe this was to show us that the default human state is powerlessness. Maybe it was to show us God's fundamental option for the poor and vulnerable. Maybe it was to teach us something about integrity, because Jesus remained powerless by remaining true to himself, being guided by love and prayer, which has a sort of power in it.

I don't know what to make of all of this, in a world where tyrants still oppress so many, where violence plagues us, where the rich seem to reign. I remember these holy days that God's vision of power is not the same as ours, and that God's reign is one of justice and mercy – more paradoxes that Jesus left us with.

This does not absolve me of the fight against the unfair powers of the world, but motivates me even as it confuses me. It fills everything and everyone I see with dignity and orients my gaze toward love, and that is gift enough.



Merry Christmas to you and yours.

This contribution is available at <http://margaretfelice.com/2016/12/24/our-powerless-jesus/>
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I Kissed His Feet [at Harvesting The Fruits of Contemplation]



God calls all of us to walk the *Via Dolorosa* with Him, to spend time at the foot of His cross, to be there as He is nailed to it, to be there throughout the entire three hours of His agonizing death, to be there as He is taken down from the cross, to be there as He is placed in His mother's arms and to be there at the tomb.

I have tried from time to time to obey Him. But I have found it hard to do. Painful would be more accurate. I don't want to be reminded of the price He paid for my sins. I don't want to acknowledge how ungrateful I have been for such an undeserved sacrificial gift. I am afraid of what other things He might ask of this obstinate sinner and of the additional disappointment, pain and anguish my refusing to change may cause such a loving and merciful Lord.

Yet, if I am ever to succeed in abandoning my will for His, of allowing Him to make of me the new creation He intended, and of spending eternity in His glorious and magnificent Presence, I must obey. I must daily walk that road and spend time at the foot of His cross.

I am hopeful that as a result of my recent visit to [St. Joseph's Oratory](#) in Montreal – the work of [Saint Andre Bessett](#), more commonly known as Brother Andre – I will be successful in this most difficult but necessary exercise. Let me tell you why.

Shortly after arriving at the Oratory and during a casual conversation at lunch with other pilgrims, I heard

for the first time of a Crucifix in the Grotto Church at the Oratory to which a great devotion had developed. Over the years, many answered prayers and miracles have been reported by those who spent time at the foot of that Cross and who left their written prayers and petitions there.

I wanted to find that special place.

I had never been to the Oratory but went to look for that Crucifix. I had not walked very far at all when I saw the Grotto's entrance just feet from where I stood.

I entered with joyful expectation. Mass was about to begin but there was still a line down the side aisle in front of a Crucifix that was in the sanctuary next to the altar rail.

My wife and I got on the line. At first I was unsure whether I was disrespecting our Lord and the priest who had just begun Mass but felt compelled to remain in the line, joining in the hymns and Mass responses. I was moved by the depth of emotion others displayed as they approached the Crucifix and held on to our Lord's nailed feet while praying silently.

When it was my turn, I snapped a quick picture of the crucifix and then reached up and put my two hands on Jesus' crucified feet. I rested my head there as well, pleading for the salvation of my soul and the souls of my loved ones. I shed a few tears. I did not want to leave or remove my hands but knew I had to do so. Others were waiting.



I kissed those nailed and blood-stained feet. Suddenly I was filled with a brief tingling sensation – a powerful awareness of God's Presence and of His undying love for me.

And then it struck me.

I had finally come to the foot of the cross. Now I understood why Jesus so persistently invites us there and why I owe Him and myself total obedience to His invitation in the future.

May I not disappoint Him.

This contribution is available at <http://harvestingthefruitsofcontemplation.blogspot.com/2017/01/monday-musings-i-kissed-his-feet.html>

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Outside In [at Meg's Life]



We watched "[Inside Out](#)" last night. I had previously seen this movie with a friend in the month before Charlotte was born and remember being moved to tears as I wondered what sort of memories our unborn child would have. I remember, when watching the movie the first time, focusing on the fact that the main character, Riley, was an only child and wondering if that was lonely for her. However, the movie reminded me of the importance of all our emotions (the happy, the sad, the lonely, the angry, the excitement, the fear, all of the feels!!) and how they all intertwine to create our lived experiences. One could even say you appreciate one feeling in part because of the opposite feeling and for me, lately, I've been feeling as if I have to behave my way from the outside in meaning I need to actively work to change what I'm feeling on the inside to behave my way back into the light and joy. Going back to "Inside Out" I was so moved by the movie that I promptly put it on the baby registry even though it would be years before our child would watch and understand it. I was so grateful when my mother-in-law bought the DVD for Charlotte this past summer! This time around though, when watching the film with Adam last night, rather than thinking of how lonely Riley was, I couldn't help but focus on how close Riley and her parents were throughout the movie, even when she was experiencing difficult emotions. It made me have hope for our relationship as a close-knit family and one that I hope will always stick together through thick and thin and also for Charlotte's ability to someday make close friends who could hopefully fill in the sibling role of sorts when she is older. I have a feeling this movie will be one I will watch over and over again and I'm so glad Marita introduced us to it last year!

These feelings of hope carried over to mass this morning when Deacon Stephen talked about Jesus being there in the cracks. I was reminded that He is there in the mess. He is there in our relationships. He is there during the hard times. He is there when life is sunny and bright. He is there during the in between times and perhaps, most of all, He is there when you feel most alone. He is there when the tears fall slipping into the cracks. With the holiday season upon us, I've been struggling to hang on to the joy in spite of consciously trying to seek the positive in each day. Lately, I have been swallowed up in the memories and keep thinking of what it was like to be pregnant at last year's work Christmas party....the anxiety I faced over flying at 30 weeks of pregnancy...the excitement of my Mom coming to the first baby

doctor appointment with me on New Year's Eve and hearing the heartbeat of the baby for the first time. I still have that video saved on my phone and listen to Charlotte's heart beating from within me from time to time.

I see the maternity coat hanging on the coat rack each time I don one of my other winter coats and scarf. I am still wearing some of my maternity clothes since my regular clothes still don't quite fit. Each time I see a currently pregnant woman, I am filled with simultaneous joy and sadness; joy for the friend who is growing a new life within her and overwhelming sadness over not being able to again carry another precious little life. Then I actively work to remind myself that we did get to do that once which is more than what others are able to do and I try to redirect my sorrow into gratitude and also an attitude of prayer for those who struggle to conceive with no answers to their questions.

A teeny tiny three month old baby boy was in front of us in church this morning and while I held sweet Charlotte in my arms, who seemed huge at 9.5 months old next to the itty bitty little babe in front of us, I felt torn between gratitude for having our little baby inches away from me and deep sorrow/resentment over where we are now. Then the guilt settled in over feeling as if I shouldn't feel sad since we do have little Charlotte..it's a vicious cycle that I'm usually able to keep at bay by drowning myself in work and social commitments but as the semester winds down and the holidays inch closer, I find that it's not as easy to fill my mind up with the to-do lists and grading and other schoolwork. I am finding that I do need to pray more and face these feelings which is hard. Super duper hard. Last night's Advent reflection prayer said that God puts you in a place for a reason and I have to be careful to not let my sorrow/resentment turn into anger in spite of yet again, being reminded of the stark reality that we reside in a predominantly Catholic town of huge families, I work at a place where the joke is that the average family size is one of nine kiddos, and I'm in a profession that deals with children. Work, community, and church are constant reminders of what I had always wanted for my future family and me. Like in the movie we watched last night, so many of my previous memories and lived experiences have shaped me into who I am today and what I had hoped for as well. It almost feels as if I need to find a way to channel my hoped for ideas that are not physically possible any more into a different outlet. Perhaps this will manifest itself in my work as I take on teaching a fifth class next semester and work to put the finishing touches on a chapter for a textbook I am writing and work on my third year review for evaluations and well, I need to stop because thinking of all that needs done work-wise is causing stress levels to rise! Or maybe this energy of having wanted to be a mom to a huge family of my own will redirect itself and be channeled through helping to coordinate Ministry to Moms or maybe something else that I don't know about yet.

I'm just thankful that Jesus is still there in spite of myself as this morning's mass reminded me. He is squeezing in through the cracks through the busy-ness I throw myself into, through the moments of despair, through the prayers being said by those who are keeping us in their thoughts, and through the darkness I find myself swallowed up in all too often since March 7th. For as much as I have been thinking back to "last year at this time, we were about to embark on our babymoon" or "last year at this time, I remember

having to pee a billion times in a day” or seeing everyone on the West Coast for the first time as a pregnant mama-to-be I also have been thinking forward and thinking of how next year will also be so different from this year and knowing me, I will be sad over all the changes and how big Charlotte is compared to now. Sigh. I guess that is part of parenting, to always be carried with the flow and helping to raise your child/children moving forward with each one while also thinking back to memories in the not so distant past. Actually, this could be applied to life in general! These are sweet moments but also tinged with some tartness due to wanting to stay in the moment forever and not wanting to leave what you know behind I guess. I suppose, in a way, that is what I’m doing....I am clinging to what I thought would have been, could have been, should have been in my mind and am scared to face what actually is since this state in life wasn't my plan. Wow....let me sit with that for a moment. This is also making me think about a video I viewed yesterday about Catholicism, homeschooling, and being a mom.

Viewing this video reminded me of the fundamental belief Adam and I subscribed to, from the beginning days of our courtship, of always being open to life as a Catholic and is perhaps one of my *biggest struggles* right now in that we were/are so open to life but my body literally is not able to be open....so what is fundamentally at my core in terms of viewing marriage and the relationship between a husband and a wife is that I can't provide that as the wife which further takes me back to what I shared in an [earlier posting of feeling so dead and barren inside](#)....but then I physically turn myself toward the light to remind myself that there are other ways of providing life such as through my job, in the community, and through interactions with others. The very areas that remind me of what I can't physically do are actually areas I need to embrace and work to provide life in other ways through my actions, the way I treat others, and the example I can try to live out in my own way. This is what I've been praying about and mulling over these last couple weeks during Advent and I hope to work that much harder to focus on the positive and actively embrace the cross in this role of being physical mama to one and spiritual mama to many. The spiritual motherhood had been my main form of mothering through endless babysitting/nannying/teaching/being an aunt opportunities over the years that up until last year I thought were simply to get me ready for the physical mothering once we got pregnant. Now, I'm viewing these previous experiences in a different light in thinking that the reason there were so many years of the spiritual mothering was to prepare me to continue down that path simultaneously as we raise Charlotte and I must actively embrace this role God has in mind for me instead of lamenting over what was lost. What a blessing to be entrusted the care of this sweet precious daughter while also being in a position to help others through my vocation and state in life.

Yes, Advent is a season of joyful hope and waiting similar to how Adam and I felt last year at this time as we enjoyed a babymoon and shared in our West Coast family's excitement over the new baby to come....this year will be joyful and full of hope in a different way in that Charlotte will get to meet the rest of her family in person in a few short days. We depart for California in less than 48 hours!! While I will miss the family here on the East Coast this holiday, what a wonderful and joyful trip this will be for Charlotte to meet more of her family! What a gift to have this time together with everyone!!



This contribution is available at <http://pagirlmeg.blogspot.com/2016/12/outside-in.html>
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The Stories I Can't Tell [at Sweeping Up Joy]



A handful of people have asked if there's been a resolution or conclusion to [my crisis of vocation, time, and blogging](#). I left off with big questions: What is worthy of my time? Is a hobby selfish? Is self-care crucial or selfish? Does blogging have a place in the New Evangelization, or am I just kidding myself because I like it?

After [Mass this week](#), I think I came to terms with a conclusion.

There are several decisions that once made, change the course of history.

Marrying someone.

Giving birth.

Killing someone.

Once you've put an unkindness out in the universe, (hello, internet!) it can't be taken back. One choice, potentially big consequences. It works the same way with generosity and kindness. One choice, potentially big consequences, largely outside your control.

But there are lots of decisions that aren't quite as once-and-for-all. Choosing a brand of shampoo, a job, a school— all those decisions can probably be reevaluated if it turns out the shampoo or your new boss gives you a rash. It might take a little effort, but it can be changed and fixed.

I don't have answers to any of the questions above, but I do know that continuing or stopping won't have much of an impact one way or another. And the decision is reversible if more information comes to light. I don't need to eschew absolutely everything that gives me pleasure, but I do need to be careful to keep things rightly ordered. That's true of everyone.

As I've thought about what writing means to me, I realized something.

I am haunted by the stories I can't tell.

Okay. That sounds a lot more dramatic than it actually is. Not **that** haunted. Here's the thing:

When I was younger, I loved listening to my grandma's stories. She talked about her life growing up, my dad's childhood— all these fascinating ideas that as an introvert and a lover of stories I soaked up. Her words allowed me to step back and observe a world I couldn't have otherwise known.

And now— those stories are gone. Forever. When I visit my grandma with Alzheimer's in the nursing home, I *will* her to talk to me again. I hope that this visit will be different. That she will be able to talk again.



To tell me about how she led a blind boy to school every day as a child. (Years later she saw him driving around. Apparently he had surgery, but gee whiz did she get a fright!)

To fill in the blanks about the woman (maybe my great-great grandmother?) who met her husband while trying on shoes during a layover at a train station on a journey. If I remember right, she missed her next train by visiting with the dashing clerk.

To tell me what it was really like to grow up in the 1940s without a father. He just left. She never talked about the challenges she faced growing up. How she felt. How they made it.

I am haunted by the stories I can't tell.

Occasionally my grandma, my only living grandparent, will hum or sing along to the songs she sang with me in her white wicker rocker 30 years ago. Other than those songs and a few phrases here and there— her words have been lost forever.

I wish I could tell 10-year-old me to write down the funny story about the dog who ate too much cabbage.

I have had (maybe 2?) people tell me I should write a book (bless their hearts!). But I don't have anything monetizable to write about. I don't write in a way that people pay for. But— I feel like I can tell stories. I like figuring out how to make people giggle through the computer screen. I think blogging is a good platform for me.

Facebook is giving me a rash. I need to stop using it. I love seeing the baby pictures and updates from friends and family on social media. I'm a sucker for a good momming meme. But it just...drains me. There's so much dumb stuff to sift through to get through to the gems. Fear of missing out on pregnancy

and engagement announcements isn't reason enough to stay.

But NOT writing...that's giving me a rash too. I think that writing out my stories helps me to process life. It's also something already I've looked back on and treasured. Someday Moe will be taller than I am, and I'll love to remind him about that time he slithered under the pews at Mass. I don't want to lose that story. It's going to increase in value over time, let me tell you. As the humiliation fades, the humor increases.

So I'm going to keep blogging, but tie up all my facebooking. *(Maybe I'll leave it to weekends because Lularoe is a drug hard to quit. But that's part of the reason to step back. Me looking at Lularoe isn't helping anyone. I'd have to actually buy it to make a difference in someone's life. What? You don't know Lularoe?!?! [Honey, come on over](#). I'll move all the couch laundry, and we'll talk. If you're lucky I'll tell you the one about the dog who ate too much cabbage, too.)*

I'm going to keep telling stories. Because I'll always feel sad about the ones that got away.

Thanks for reading! Sign up on or by email subscription above to catch future posts.

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Gabriel, Joseph, and Mary [at A Catholic Citizen in America]



Monday's Gospel reading, [Luke 1:26–38](#), is a repeat from December 8.

It starts with:

“[10](#) In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
“to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.
“And coming to her, he said, ‘Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ ”
([Luke 1:26–28](#))



A little earlier in that chapter we get an account of Gabriel's interview with Zachariah: [Luke 1:10–20](#). That's when Gabriel personally delivers God's response to Zachariah's prayer — and Zachariah demands proof.

Zachariah got proof, all right. He couldn't talk for months. Not until he agreed with his wife about his son's name: in writing.

Elizabeth said the boy's name was John, the same name Gabriel had specified:

“[18](#) When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father,
“but his mother said in reply, ‘No. He will be called John.’
“But they answered her, ‘There is no one among your relatives who has this name.’
“So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called.
“He asked for a tablet and wrote, ‘John is his name,’ and all were amazed.
“Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God.”
([Luke 1:59–64](#))

Questions and Responses

I don't know why Zachariah's and Mary's questions got different responses.

Figuring out what goes on in the head of another human is hard enough. Trying to understand what one of the few angels named in the Bible was thinking may be impossible.

That won't stop me from guessing.

Maybe it's my imagination, but Gabriel's response to Zachariah seems a tad testy.

“Then Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.’

“And the angel said to him in reply, ‘I am Gabriel,⁸ who stand before God. I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news.

“But now you will be speechless and unable to talk⁹ until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time.’ ”

([Luke 1:19–20](#))



Maybe I get that impression because a little earlier Gabriel had been calming Zachariah down:

“Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him.

“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid,⁵ Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John.’”

([Luke 1:12–13](#))

And right after Gabriel had described what a great man John would be — Zachariah asks **“How shall I know this?”**!

That's a pretty brash question from someone who'd been fearful a minute earlier. Plus, it was unnecessary. If Elizabeth was pregnant, he'd have his proof in a few months.

Mary's question made more sense: [“how can this be](#), since I have no relations with a man?”

Besides, Gabriel would know that he'd be taking orders from this young woman: and I'm getting ahead of the story.

Joseph and Mary's Betrothal

We're up to the familiar “Christmas story” today: [Matthew 1:18–24](#), when Joseph learns that he's involved in a very special mission. All things considered, he took the news rather well.

Moses tried to talk his way out of his job in the ‘burning bush’ interview. I talked about [Exodus 3:11](#), [13](#), [4:1](#), [4:10](#), and [4:13](#) two weeks back. ([December 4, 2016](#))

Joseph had at least as much reason to balk as Moses did.

“⁶ Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, ⁷ but before they lived together, she was found with child through the holy Spirit.

“Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, ⁸ yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly.

([Matthew 1:18–19](#))

Footnotes ⁷ and ⁸ explain that a betrothed man and woman were considered husband and wife.

Look at the situation from Joseph’s viewpoint.

Here he was, betrothed to someone he thought was a fine young woman: and she’s pregnant. Infidelity at this point was adultery, which could mean death by stoning.

If Mary hadn’t been pregnant, the betrothal would probably have lasted a few months, after which she would move into Joseph’s home.

I suspect, but haven’t researched this, that Mary could still have moved in with Joseph. Folks would simply have assumed that the couple got impatient.

But Joseph **knows** he’s not the father, which must have hurt. He had reason to think Mary was lacking in good sense, or had Gomer’s habits. ([Hoseah 1:2–3](#))

That sort of thing doesn’t get a person permanently blacklisted, though.

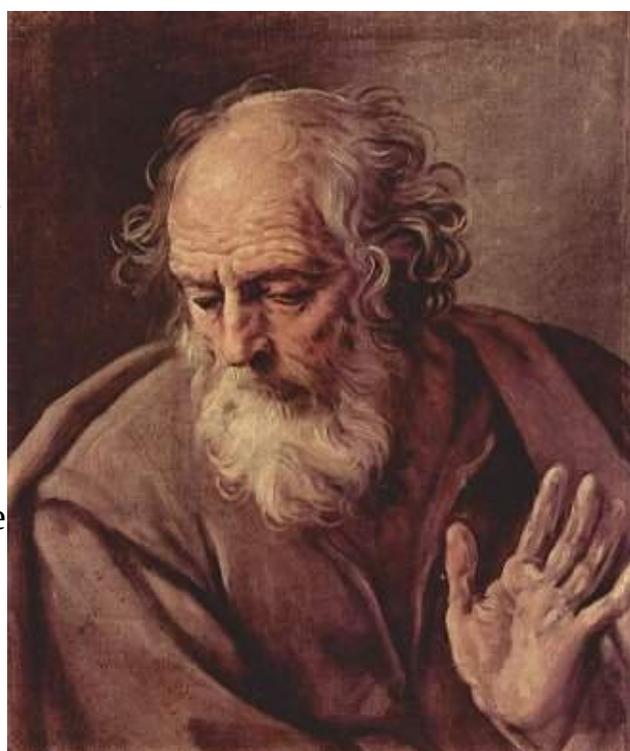
Rahab was a “harlot.” we meet her in [Joshua 2:1](#). She met someone named Salmon, settled down, had a son named Boaz, and all three show up in our Lord’s family tree. Like it says in [James 2:25](#), what we do matters: and she did good. ([Matthew 1:5](#))

“A Righteous Man”

Okay. Joseph was “a righteous man,” devoutly observing the Mosaic law: uncomfortable about Mary’s apparent infidelity **and** unwilling to let her get killed.

Let’s remember that there’s more to the Old Testament than ‘thou shalt not’ and death by stoning — [Psalms 109:21](#); [Wisdom 11:23](#); [Sirach 2:7](#); and [Daniel 3:35](#); for example.

I talked about our Lord, the woman caught in adultery, mercy, [Matthew 5:27–28](#), and getting a grip, before. ([November 21, 2016](#); [November 20, 2016](#))



Back to Joseph’s awkward situation.

“Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord ⁹ appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.’”

([Matthew 1:20](#))

Let that sink in: “For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her.” The ‘other man’ was — **God**.

Maybe Joseph didn’t argue because the angel showed up in a dream. Maybe he feared that the Almighty would get angry if he didn’t go through with the rest of the marriage.

Or maybe he had an attitude toward orders from God like Mary’s.

“May it be Done”

After Gabriel outlined how she could have a son, Mary said:

“Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.”

([Luke 1:38](#))

No “buts,” no “what ifs,” just “may it be done to me according to your word.”

Mary was probably in her teens at the time.

She lived in a society that was unsympathetic toward women in her position, at best.

She would have known the risks she would face.

Her “may it be done to me” was “[submissive](#),” since she accepted God’s authority.

But I do not think she was “submissive” in the sense of being passive or [servile](#).¹

Recognizing competent authority is one thing. Mindlessly doing what I’m told would be a bad idea for anybody. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, [85–87](#), [156](#), [1897–1904](#), [2256](#))

I think Mary’s “may it be done to me” took guts and [grit](#): qualities she’d need, a third of a century later.

And that’s another topic.

“Son of David”

The two genealogies of Jesus, in [Matthew 1:1–17](#) and [Luke 3:23–38](#), don’t match up.



I figure [footnote](#) in the New American Bible's [Luke 3](#) makes sense.

Matthew's genealogy starts with Abraham because he was showing our Lord's bonds with the Israelites.

Luke was showing that Jesus came for all of us. That's why his genealogy goes back to "Adam, the [son of God](#)."

Like I keep saying, the Bible wasn't written by Americans.² (Catechism, [101–133](#))

I might not have called Joseph the "son of David." But reading that phrase in [Matthew 1:20](#) doesn't make me doubt that Joseph really lived.

I've talked about reading the Bible and using my brains before, too. ([December 13, 2016](#); [November 8, 2016](#); [August 28, 2016](#); [July 29, 2016](#))

Angels, Advent, and all that:

¹ I remember the 'good old days,' when folks who acted as if they'd read [Ephesians 5:22](#), but not [Ephesians 5:21–30](#), were taken more seriously. I do not miss the 'good old days.' Men and women have equal dignity, and I'm expected to love my wife as Jesus loved the Church. (Catechism, [1601–1617](#), [2331–2336](#))

² I like being an American, on the whole. But my native culture's quirks are not unchanging realities. Faith and reason, science and religion, work together; or should:

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HTTP/1.1 200 OK Server: nginx Date: Sat, 14 Jan 2017 16:21:11 GMT Content-Type: text/html; charset=UTF-8 Transfer-Encoding: chunked Connection: keep-alive Strict-Transport-Security: max-age=86400 Vary: Accept-Encoding Vary: Cookie X-hacker: If you're reading this, you should visit automattic.com/jobs and apply to join the fun, mention this header. X-Pingback: <https://shiftingmyperspective.com/xmlrpc.php> Link: ; rel=shortlink X-ac: 3.ord _dca

The Gift of Darkness [at Shifting My Perspective]

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who lived in a land of gloom a light has shown. Isaiah 9:2



I love when the clocks fall back for daylight savings. I always thought it was because all that cold and darkness gives me a reason to hunker down and hibernate. It's the time of year I don't feel all the spring and summer pressure to get outside, create great adventures, and strive to "seize the day."

But the

[passing of my sister-in-law](#)

, and the gloomy weather on Christmas Eve morning, helped me realize just exactly why I love all that darkness.

Too much sunshine overwhelms me. Not only do I physically overheat in ten seconds flat, but when everything is illuminated, I get confused: I don't know what to prioritize. For fear of letting balls drop, I prioritize everything. Then I get manic.

I run around like a chicken with my head cut off: trying to create fun memories with my kids, keeping up with housework and my to-do list, fostering deep and meaningful friendships, investing in my marriage, challenging myself with things to nurture and grow my spirit, etc. The end result is I burn out, and I am

miserable.

Yes, all those elements are important in creating a balanced and fulfilling life. But I convince myself I have to contribute to each aspect every single day. Just writing about it causes me to hyperventilate.

When my sister-in-law passed away a few weeks ago, the darkness had my crazy world screeching to a halt. Suddenly my priorities became crystal clear: buy plane tickets, get childcare, travel to Maryland for her services. Nothing else mattered.

The loss of someone we dearly loved illuminated our next priority: spend more quality time with our kids. The Saturday after we got home, my husband and I created our first ever Family Christmas Party (a new tradition I hope to keep forever). For hours and hours, all we did was play Christmas game after Christmas game, just the five of us. I've never had so much fun with my little family before!

On Christmas Eve morning, when it was dark and gloomy, I lit the candles on my [Advent wreath](#). That flickering light left the dirty dishes, unmade beds, and list of things to do in the shadows. Instead, it cast a glow over The Infant in the crib, leading my eye to what matters most on the eve of one of the holiest days of the year.

[Romans 8:28](#) talks about God using all things for His purpose, darkness and gloom included. The Taoist [parable of the farmer and his horse](#) poses the questions: Who's to say what's bad or good? Both teach us that what can seem like a bad thing initially, usually brings some aspect of good.

When we light a candle of faith to expel the darkness, God always illuminates the good in the midst of the pain, loss, or gloom. In fact, sometimes it's the only way we'll ever see our true priorities, notice the lesson we're meant to learn, or recognize the path God wants us to take. With the right perspective, all is gift, including the darkness.

Questions For Reflection:

- * Am I facing some pain, loss, or darkness right now?***
- * Have I lit a candle of faith in the midst of that darkness?***
- * What is the bright light of God trying to illuminate for me?***



Straw and Snowflake Race.



Christmas Charades.



Christmas Pictionary.



Christmas Pictionary.



Christmas Bingo.



Cutting Christmas snowflakes.

Our first Family Christmas Party!

- This post contains an Amazon Affiliate link.

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To Christians Contemplating Marriage [at The Contemplative Catholic Convert]

I remember it well. I was 22, on active duty with the US Navy in a foreign country – and very lonely. I wanted to get married before I got too old and lost my opportunity to find a suitable life-mate.

I was a new Christian, and so I spent a lot of time praying for a wife. But prospects on the Naval Base at Yokosuka, Japan didn't look promising.

Then out of the proverbial 'blue' I received a letter from an old girlfriend. We'd dated for several years before we broke up around the time I enlisted in the navy. So we exchanged letters for a while – and then I called overseas to the States to ask her to marry me.

She agreed, and I celebrated to know I'd soon be married. A few days later I visited my pastor, Billy Dodson. He was one of the chaplains on the naval base. When I told him my good news, he sat quietly for only a moment before he asked the question I feared he would ask.

“Is she a Christian?”

He didn't have to cite the Biblical passage from 2 Corinthians. I'd already been trying to ignore it. *“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?”* (2 Corinthians 6:14-15).

“Is she a Christian?” He pressed.

Deflated, I struggled at a bleak crossroads. I could ignore the chaplain's advice – after all, what did *he* know, or care, about my loneliness? Or I could obey God – even if it meant remaining alone.

I made the right choice, but that choice did not take the edge off my loneliness.

Six months later I received another letter – this one from a different former girlfriend. We corresponded for a few months until – yes, you probably guessed it. I asked her to marry me.

Again joyful – but more subdued than the last time as I walked into the chaplain’s office – I told him of my latest proposal. He looked into my eyes, hesitated a moment, and then sighed. I pushed myself into the back of the chair and my fingers gripped the arm rests. I knew what was coming.

“Is she a Christian?”

She was not.

He didn’t need to open the Bible on his desk. He simply reminded me of that passage in 2 Corinthians.

Aching in the pit of my stomach and my head bowed low, I left his office. I knew he was right. I struggled again with the same choice, but now with a different person. I decided to obey God, but now wondered if I’d ever get married.

After my second defeat, I changed my prayer. Instead of simply asking the Lord for a Christian woman, I was more specific. I wanted to spend my life with a woman who was not content to simply warm a pew each Sunday. I wanted a woman who determined to know and serve Christ with as much passion as I had to know and serve Him. And perhaps most important: I wanted to love and be loved by a woman who loved Jesus far more than she loved me.

As I write this in December 2016, Nancy and I are approaching our 42nd wedding anniversary. We met on the naval base several months after I broke my engagement with the second woman. Chaplain Dodson grinned broadly when I answered his question – this time for the third time – “Yes. Nancy’s a Christian.”

It is easy for me to extrapolate from my experiences as a young adult to know what my life would be like today if I had not obeyed the Scripture. I know I would never have been as fruitful in my work for the Lord if I’d married either of the two other women. I wonder if I could have managed even a distant relationship with my Lord if I’d married either person. Oh! I shudder to even contemplate such a tragedy!

Christian – if you are contemplating marriage, please hear God’s word: *“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?”*

Yes, it is often difficult to say no – to ourselves and to someone we love. But it is always the best choice to obey God than to compromise His commandments.

Billy Dodson died many years ago, but the legacy he left me remains a vital part of my life together with Nancy. Billy cared enough for me to challenge me to obey God without compromise. He could not have given me better guidance.



This contribution is available at <http://thecontemplativecatholicconvert.blogspot.com/2016/12/to-christians-contemplating-marriage.html>
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The Chasing Herods In Our Lives [at A Moment From De Sales]

When Christ was born in Bethlehem, the Angels sang a chorus to the bewildered shepherds “*Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors.*” (Luke 2:14) But instead we know that Jesus came into a world of sinners, who continued to work against Him and His message of peace on this earth then and even now.

King Herod distinguished himself as the foremost of these sinners. As we know, he chased after this Holy Family slaughtering innocent male children in his wake simply to protect his throne. His hunt of this Holy Family caused their quick flight and exile into Egypt.

Later in his life Jesus confirmed that those "signed with His seal" the “world would hate.” Jesus knew that "Herods" will always chase His followers with one goal--“to slaughter us” simply to protect themselves.

And these demons change with the times and they never give up. These modern day *Chasing Herods* chase us everywhere and can appear at any time. If we don't flee them, they can suffocate us by draining us of any hope.

In the Harry Potter novel, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Dementors roamed Azkaban prison "draining joy from the prisoners." These "*Chasing Herods*" types wanted the prisoners *to give up* and eventually perish. Modern day *Chasing Herods* do the same thing. They chase us like Dementors wanting us to give up on Jesus' message and simply “go away.”

Chasing Herods encourage us to be intolerant and make fun of others who are different. In fact, to protect their own interests, these *Chasing Herods* encourage us to see all differences as the “demons” to be avoided. They even taunt us to be dishonest or unfaithful to others.

But Jesus wants us to respond as Mary and Joseph did, *i.e.*, when these *Chasing Herods* appear just “take this child Jesus” and seek safety with Jesus. In this way we keep hope and joy a part of our lives.

Chasing Herods want us to believe that we are “not good” persons, or that we are “a disappointment” to those who love us. And that “others are better than we are,” suggesting that “God can't possibly love us as much as He loves those others.” *Chasing Herods* want us to hear that “God blesses others' efforts and not ours--no matter how hard we try”--for our sins are “too great” for God to take away.

When we feel the “tugs” of these *Chasing Herods*, we have to imitate Mary and Joseph. “*Arise and take the Child Jesus in our hearts and flee.*” We have to act like Joseph and Mary--allowing Jesus to protect us in ways we can't even imagine.

Look at Mary, Jesus and Joseph's journey to Egypt. Their flight was like fleeing into darkness. They saw no light at the end of their tunnel, yet they trusted in the Angel's promises.

We can do the exact same thing. We have the same promises--as “*Jesus was born to save us all and He came that none of us will perish.*” We must not forget that Jesus said He would remain with us “*for all times even until the end of time.*”

Every Christmas, Jesus' birth reminds us that God is never far, even in our trials. His blessings never cease raining upon us. And knowing this, we are assured that any and all ***Chasing Herods*** can never devour us--for Jesus is and always will be our Savior.

A BLESSED AND HAPPY NEW YEAR!

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The Lyric Police, Fair vs. Sweet and Politically-Correct Christmas Carols [at FranciscanMom]

It's that time of the year when Catholic parish musicians all over this land break out the Wite-Out and, once again, adjust the lyrics on the Christmas carols so their old copies of the music have the new words.

Many thanks to Oregon Catholic Press (OCP) for making this annoyance possible.

Every year when the new missalette/hymnal comes out, musicians have to check their pages and make sure what they're singing matches what's in the books in the pews.

Last night at practice, we rehearsed *Immaculate Mary* in preparation for next week's feast day. Many people have the lyrics to that song memorized—but those lyrics aren't the same as the ones in the book. Mary reigns in *heaven* now, not in *splendor*; her name is *fair*, not *sweet*. So this discussion happened:

Singer: “Oh wow, these words are really different. And look at verse 3! It's not the same at all as the one I learned when I was a kid. I'm going to have to concentrate on this while I'm singing.”

Musician 1: “Who lets them change the words?”

Musician 2: “The publisher decides that.”

Musician 1: “How do they get away with that? They can't just change the words like that.”

Musician 2: “Well, they did...”

Musician 1: “So how do we stop them?”

I don't know if we *can* stop them, but there's just no good reason to go around changing the lyrics to songs that have been the same for over 100 years. That's going to discourage people from singing. They'll go along from memory until they reach the part that's different, and they'll either sing it the old way, loud and proud, or they'll get embarrassed and stop right there.

Musician 1: “Can't we just announce to the people that we're going to say *splendor* instead?”

We're not looking forward to lyric-checking all the Christmas carols, either. That's a job that needs to be done every year, because OCP likes to make the lyrics more politically-correct by removing words like “man” (never mind how much it messes with the poetry of the carol) but they tweak the lyrics year after year, so it's never the same way twice.

Hence the Wite-Out, because we're happy with the musical arrangement we've got and don't want to rewrite chord transpositions just because the words were changed.

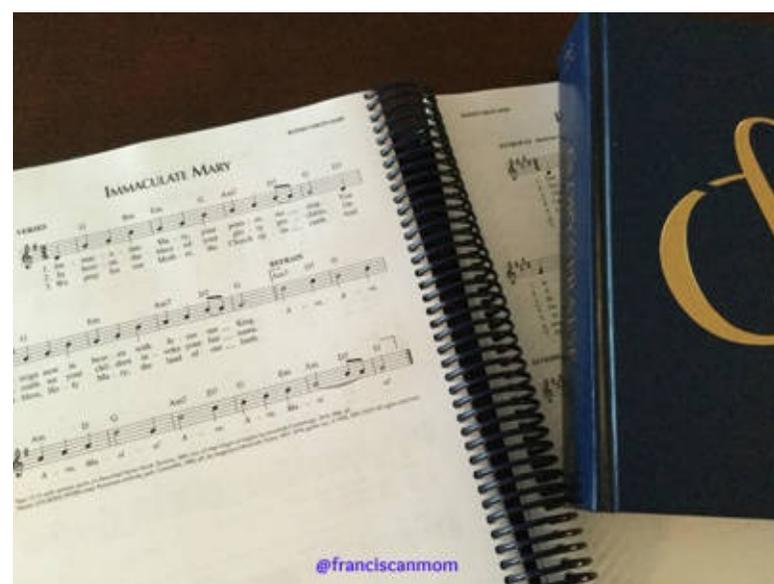
Now hear this, OCP and any other hymnal publishers who like to mess with hundred-year-old lyrics to satisfy the politically-correct fad du jour: **you're making the music ministers' job harder**. We're there to help people pray through music. Especially at Christmas, when churches see many visitors and people

who only show up occasionally, musicians should want to make the hymns as accessible as they can be.

People in the congregation at Christmas expect those familiar favorites: *O Come All Ye Faithful*, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, *Silent Night*, *Joy to the World*. Singing these familiar carols is a way of welcoming everyone to the celebration. Forcing new lyrics on people who might already feel unfamiliar enough with what's going on at Mass is not welcoming. Forcing new lyrics on people who are in the pews, week after week, striving to participate as best they can, is not welcoming to them either; it doesn't encourage anyone to sing (or to open the hymnal and look for the words.)

I'm sure you're already hard at work on the hymnals beginning in Advent 2017. Please dig out your 25-year-old hymnal archives and return the lyrics to their proper poetry and glory. No one wants political correctness forced upon them in the middle of *Joy to the World*.

And while you're at it, give the Blessed Mother her splendor back.



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Prepare for Christmas: Open Yourself to God in Prayer



Almost 25 years ago, I spent Christmas with a family who had one son who was adored by everyone. However, that Christmas there was another child present who had been semi-fostered. She stayed with them for some weekends and most of the school holidays. At first, the girl looked bewildered and not a little disappointed when she was given her Christmas present from under the tree, for when she unwrapped the parcel all she found was a bundle of papers. Then it was explained to her that they were her papers of adoption. From then on, she was a full member of the family. She didn't need to go back to the orphanage at the end of the holiday. In fact, she did not need to go back ever again. Tears of joy just rolled down her cheeks, and she ran over to her new Father and hugged and hugged him. He told her they had no choice with their own son, they accepted and loved him when he came, but she was very special because they had chosen her when they need not have chosen her at all.

A Home of Their Own

What better gift can anyone receive than a home of their own, a home where there is love that surrounds and supports them, come what may. That is what everyone really wants more than anything else. If that home could be guaranteed forever, then that would be the closest thing to heaven on earth. Now that is the gift that Jesus came to give to everyone on the first Christmas day. It was Jesus himself who first explained how his Father chose to adopt us into his family so that we would never be orphans, never ever be alone in this life or the next. What better Christmas present could we ever hope for, even in our wildest dreams?

God was called Father thirteen times in the Old Testament. Each time the word Father was used, it was used as another word for Creator. In other words, God was a Father because He made the world in the first place and everything in it. In the same way that we would say Michelangelo was the father of his statue of David, because he carved it, or that Hippocrates was 'the father of medicine' because he was the first to systematise it into a science.

Abba, Daddy

However, when Jesus came he chose another word with which to describe the Fatherhood of God that made him far more than a distant Creator. It was the Aramaic word *Abba*, which means *daddy*, or its equivalent in any language. The word father can be ambivalent, it can have many different meanings, but the word *daddy* can only have one. What is a daddy? Who is a daddy? – He is someone who communicates his very own life to his children. When Jesus began to refer to God in this way, it would have shocked his contemporaries for daring to use such a homely pet name to describe the Almighty Creator before whom they would prostrate themselves. Now Jesus not only used this word daddy (*Abba*) to show how He relates to God, but to explain how God wants us to relate to him, and through Him to us. That is why, when he taught us the greatest prayer of all, he did not use the words *Our Father* but the words *Our Daddy (Abba)*.

Our Daddy Who Art in Heaven

It is not just the ancient Jews who were shocked when Jesus told them to call God, daddy, but others too, and that includes us. Most of us would find it difficult if not impossible to pray *Our Daddy who art in heaven,*” even though that is what Jesus himself tells us to do. This single Aramaic word *Abba* sums up the very meaning of the gospel message more than any other word used in the New Testament. The very reason Jesus gives for entering our world, was in his own words, “*That you may have life and have it ever more fully*”, and that life was the life that he received from the Father and which he in his turn has given to us.

This life was the self-same life by which he was conceived in Mary’s womb, that gave him birth on the first Christmas and filled him ever more fully as “*he grew in wisdom and understanding with the years*“. The experience of his own dad’s life within him made Jesus feel loved. It was the source of his unique inner security and it gave him the help and strength he needed to do his will at all times. That is why He wanted everyone to receive and experience all that he had received, so that others may feel the deep inner security that enveloped him, and be given the help and strength to do for others what he has done and still does. That is precisely why he came on the first Christmas, and that is why there can be no better way of preparing for this Christmas than by trying to make a mini retreat, beginning now, to help receive him ever more fully into our hearts in preparation for the most popular and universally loved feast in the Christian calendar.

Enable Fatherly Love to Penetrate

Now this can only happen if we freely choose to create space and time each day before Christmas to enable God’s fatherly love to penetrate us ever more fully until we begin to experience it welling up from within to possess every part of us. Love cannot be forced on anyone and that is true of God’s love too, so if we do not set time aside to open ourselves to receive it, then his love cannot enter into us.

This little retreat then can offer us all the opportunity to come to know and love the Father more and more intimately until we come to know and experience the love that St Paul says, “*surpasses the understanding*”. When this happens, we will come to realise through our own personal experience that the Father who created us, is in fact, the perfect loving dad that we have always wanted.

Today Christ is Born Again

I am not suggesting that you pack up work or leave home to head for the nearest monastery or retreat centre. I am suggesting something far simpler than that. I am suggesting that you retreat from your normal daily routine during Advent to give ten to fifteen minutes to God in prayer each day. You see, there is no better way that you could prepare for Christmas than by turning and opening yourself to God in prayer. This will gradually enable him to penetrate you with the same Holy Spirit who conceived Jesus in Mary's womb and then brought him to birth in Bethlehem. Then, on Christmas day, you will be able to say with St Bernard, "*Today Christ is born again,*" because he will be born again in you on that day and on every day that you choose to receive Him.

Christ Lives in Us and We Live in Him

God's plan from the very beginning was not just to enter our world by entering into the human body of Jesus on the first Christmas day, but through him, to enter into all who freely choose to receive him on every day. His plan has always been that our human bodies should become the only place where he would make his permanent home here on earth. "*Make your home in me and I will make my home in you.*" Once in residence, his love will gradually grow to extend to every part of us, unless we prevent it until we can say one day with St Paul, "*I live, no it is no longer I who live, but Christ, who lives in me.*" When Christ lives in us and we live in him we will be his brothers and sisters with a common Father who chose to adopt us all from the beginning.

Prayer is merely the traditional word used to describe how we set about turning and opening ourselves to receive the Father's love. It was this love that first gave birth to our brother Jesus whose birthday we can best celebrate this Christmas by doing all we can to allow him to make his permanent home in our hearts.

First published on [Catholic Stand](#)

This contribution is available at <http://www.davidtorkington.com/prepare-christmas-open-god-prayer/>
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Thoughts on Authority and Disobedience [at If I Might Interject]

The Church has rules. That's not open for debate. Some of these rules come from doctrine: God has taught us, and we cannot disobey these rules without disobeying Him. Others come from the Church applying her beliefs to face situations that arise in a given time, We cannot disobey these rules (Luke 10:16), but the Church can decide to change them when conditions change. Dangers arise when people confuse these things. If one assumes that Our Lord's teaching is a "man made rule," or that a discipline is Our Lord's teaching, they wind up rebelling against Our Lord and the Church He established.

There's more to it than that, however. Some confuse their assumptions about Scripture or about Church teaching are the teaching of Our Lord or His Church, when they actually apply restrictions or laxity which are not present. As Catholics, we're blessed to have a Magisterium which has the right and responsibility to determine how these teachings are to be understood and applied in each age. They have the authority to decide when a change of discipline is needed and how Our Lord's teachings, as passed on to us by the Apostles, faces the new challenges from the world.

Our Lord gave the Church the authority to bind and loose in His name, and this authority did not end with the death of the Apostles, but continues on with their successors until the end of the world. There will occasionally be Judases among them, but we believe the Lord will keep His promises and protect the Church from teaching error. These promises are important. If we did not know who was protected from teaching error, we could never know who we could trust to properly bind and loose. If the Bishop of Rome could sometimes truth and sometimes err—as happened with the patriarchates of ancient Christendom—how could we know who to turn to?

The history of the ancient Church tells us of sincere men who believed that the words of Scripture taught something contrary to the Church. These men persuaded emperors and patriarchs to embrace errors about the faith. It was only the Bishop of Rome that consistently resisted these errors. Sometimes that was tenuous—that a Pope might only be silent instead of teaching error—but the evidence shows that Popes did not teach error when using their authority to teach [†]. If a Pope *were* to teach that it was permissible to do evil, this would be a matter of the Church binding error, permitting a Catholic to do something which endangered their souls. The next Pope to do this would be the first.

Understanding this, we can see how reckless it is to accuse the Pope of teaching error, against the true faith of the Church. Such an accusation goes far beyond the accusation of the man holding the office. It must assert that God does not protect His Church and we must decide for ourselves when the Church teaches rightly or wrongly. That's a recipe for spiritual anarchy, and contrary to what the Church teaches about herself.

Accordingly, some who disagree with the direction a Pope takes try to downplay the authority of a teaching. Since the Church teaches that the faithful must obey her teachings, some try to claim that a teaching is not binding unless it is infallible. Others try to draw a dividing line over what level of Papal document is binding [*] and claim that an unpopular document is neither binding nor protected from error. That is to legalistically split hairs. Even before Vatican II, the Church had a clear idea as to when the Pope was not protected from error:

The Pope is therefore not infallible when he gives a decision as man, bishop, scholar, preacher, or confessor, nor when he expresses an opinion on questions of art, politics, or secular science. Infallibility is quite distinct from personal impeccability.

F. J. Koch, *A Manual of Apologetics*, ed. Charles Bruehl, trans. A. M. Buchanan (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1915), 177–178.

One can exclude a press conference, an interview, decisions governing the diocese of Rome, writing a book [§], giving a homily and the like. But when the Pope, or those authorized by him, gives instruction, we are obliged to obey:

can. 754† All the Christian faithful are obliged to observe the constitutions and decrees which the legitimate authority of the Church issues in order to propose doctrine and to proscribe erroneous opinions, particularly those which the Roman Pontiff or the college of bishops puts forth.

Code of Canon Law: New English Translation (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1998), 248.

Yes, we can have (charitable) differences of opinion on how to best carry out these decrees, but we can't refuse obedience in the name of appealing to an earlier teaching of the Church or by trying to contrast the Bible with the Church. Unfortunately, people do make these appeals. Critics of St. John Paul II appealed to the Bible with selective quotes on love and mercy. Critics of Pope Francis try to argue that he contradicts his predecessors.

The problem is, if we accept their claims, we're back to the problem of never being able to know when the magisterium taught truly and when they did not. Some liberal Catholics reject Popes they dislike. Some conservative Catholics do the same. Without a final authority, who can determine who is right? We'd be reduced to making the appeal the Mormons make about the *Book of Mormon*: Feeling a "burning of the breast." But heretics feel just as strongly about their errors as orthodox Catholics feel about the truth. So we can't rely on what feels right, or how we interpret Scripture or Church teaching. We must use the magisterium as the guide. If we proclaim that we can't trust the authority of the Church *today*, then we have no guide at all. We merely have [a Church with a billion Popes](#).

We can trust God to protect the Pope from teaching error as Pope. That can either be through extraordinary tools, like *ex cathedra* teachings, or it can be from preventing a morally bad Pope from teaching, or somewhere in between. But we can't declare a teaching we dislike as somehow being an exception to our obligation to obey the Pope when he teaches. We can't invent excuses not to obey. So, having faith in God to protect His Church, we should pray for the Pope and bishops to be effective teachers.

[†] Pope John XXII held a private opinion on the Beatific Vision which his successor later defined to the contrary. But at the time, it was not defined, and he did not teach as Pope on the subject. Pope Honorius may or may not have personally believed in *Monothelism* (Scholars are divided). However, he did not formally teach it as Pope. The documents under contention were private letters.

[*] Ironically, some of these critics will simultaneously say that a Papal statement is *not* binding but somehow prove the Pope is “teaching error.” If it is a teaching, it is binding (See *Code of Canon Law*, #[751-754](#)). If it is not teaching, the Pope is not “teaching” error.

[§] For example, Benedict XVI’s *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy was very insightful, but not protected under infallibility.

This contribution is available at <http://www.ifimightinterject.com/2016/12/thoughts-on-authority-and-disobedience.html>
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HTTP/1.1 200 OK Server: nginx Date: Sat, 14 Jan 2017 16:21:21 GMT Content-Type: text/html; charset=UTF-8 Transfer-Encoding: chunked Connection: keep-alive Vary: Accept-Encoding Last-Modified: Sat, 14 Jan 2017 16:18:21 GMT Cache-Control: max-age=120, must-revalidate X-nananana: Batcache Vary: Cookie X-hacker: If you're reading this, you should visit automatic.com/jobs and apply to join the fun, mention this header. X-Pingback: <https://sunflowersojourn.wordpress.com/xmlrpc.php> Link: ; rel=shortlink X-ac: 1.ord _dca Strict-Transport-Security: max-age=15552000

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Reflecting on Christmas and Gifts [at Sunflower Sojourn]

Together journeying toward the Creator and becoming the creations we were meant to be.

Reflecting on Christmas and Gifts [at Sunflower Sojourn]

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”~James 1:17

This time of year we celebrate the greatest, most perfect gift the world has ever seen: Jesus Christ! God the Father sent us His only Son as a gift. Jesus Christ coming as a human being enabled us to have a personal relationship with God, a more intimate relationship. All along the Father knew that His Son would suffer a horrific death. He sacrificed His only Son for wretched human beings! But He knew that this would bring salvation for His children. ***The gift of relationship with Jesus Christ is one that can't be beat.*** And the gift of salvation? It's an eternal gift!

I have asked for many gifts throughout my lifetime. In this post I am thinking specifically of gifts that I have asked of my Heavenly Father. Some gifts I have asked for years, but they are not gifts He has seen fit to give me—at least not yet. **Instead, He's given me many other gifts—gifts that have blessed my life abundantly and made my heart full.**



unsplash.com

I have an amazing roommate. I am a hugely independent person. If one year ago you would have told me I'd be sharing a house, I wouldn't have believed you. Having a companion to share life with has been one of the biggest blessings of this year. **Especially a roommate that God truly chose and made it clear to us that this was an open door from Him. Our temperaments and our vision for life are so alike.**



I have Benny, an amazingly affectionate kitty. I was “maybe” going to get a cat. Then he put his paw on my arm and looked up at me. So he came home with me. Never in my life have I met a cat like him. I am so grateful he is mine to care for and love. Every day he provides laughter to us with his antics. The



Lord knew I needed him.

The Heavenly Father has given me a job that allows me to interact with my brothers and sisters from around the world daily—one of my greatest joys. And this year, He gave me the long-awaited opportunity to travel across the world!



I could go on and on. The thing is, what I've noticed is that nearly all of these gifts were unexpected. They weren't what I prayed for, but they were still answered prayers. I didn't ask for these gifts, but I needed them greatly. And I am so grateful. My heart is happy and full.

What great gifts from our Father are we not seeing because we're simply focused on the ones we don't have?

Our Father is a good, good Father!

This contribution is available at <http://sunflowersojourn.wordpress.com/2016/12/19/reflecting-on-christmas-and-gifts/>
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I reprint this poem every Christmas. It's worth some solemn meditation.

Lament of St. Nicholas by Paul Murano

('Twas the Week Before Christmas - in Contemporary America)

'Twas the week before Christmas and throughout heaven above
the angels and saints were proclaiming God's love

*"Nicholas", called Jesus, "Faithful servant on earth
it's time for children to celebrate my birth*

*Go on and inspire the parents of these
to all of their hearts I now give you the keys"*

Yes Lord! cried Nicolas with the greatest of joys

I love helping out with their clothes and their toys

But most of all Lord what I work for these days

is leading their minds back to you and your ways

So he started his mission, this jolly ol' soul,

to the homes of God's children, the young and the old

The trees were in place and the candy canes hung

but he stared at the fireplace as carols were sung

Something's wrong! said the saint, as it paused his delight

Less than half of the stockings are hanging this night!

I see cars, DVR's, home computers, and more

but I hear not the laughter that I heard once before!

So he checked his list twice but it just didn't jive

there were many more children that were meant to be alive



Dear Lord, cried St. Nicholas with a voice of surprise

Many children are missing! as the tears filled his eyes

Oh Nicholas my servant, I thought that you knew

in many heart\$\$ green has replaced pink and blue

And Nicholas, said Jesus with a sad solemn voice

in the past 40 years this is what they've called "choice"

Then He took the saint's list and divided it thrice

and revealed the true meaning of naughty and nice:

This first group has children I could never create

my people used barriers and drugs with their mate

The second are the children that had never been born

from the wombs of their mothers they were taken and torn

And the third group are now all the children on earth

they're the ones that did make it through conception and birth

Oh Jesus I'm sorry! ol' St. Nicholas cried

This shouldn't be happening - they forgot why You died!

Help me to show them how to be brave

like the poor Virgin Mary giving birth in a cave!

I Am the hope many don't know, Jesus said

so go forth dear St. Nicholas – my light you must spread

'Twas the week before Christmas and St. Nicholas did pray:

Merry Christmas to all ... and to all a new day!

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Photo and color scheme were added by me. This is a reprint from 2013. image

- <http://dontbuytheabortionlie.blogspot.com/2011/02/contraception-is-not-solution.html>

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This contribution is available at <http://tasteandsee2.blogspot.com/2016/12/a-christmas-poem-about-reality-of.html>  
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# Baking bread during the final days of Advent [at Catholic Review]

When we wake up, the world is glazed in ice. We aren't going anywhere for a while.

I call my parents to see whether they still have power, and my father starts talking about baking. It's a baking kind of day, and he mentions cinnamon rolls.

"You probably don't have yeast," he says.

Yet somehow I do, even though I've never used it and it expired a few weeks ago.

My 7-year-old chef joins me, and we start measuring and mixing.

It feels like a bit of a leap of faith. I'm not a precise person, and precision seems to be important for bread making. Even though I try to use the measuring cup lines, we spill. I don't sift and can't decide whether I forgot or just don't want to admit that sifting might matter. Then, because I'm cooking lunch at the same time, we lose track of how much we've kneaded. And the principal kneader is extremely enthusiastic, but he is not always the most focused on his kneading.

We are undeterred. Daniel and I keep talking about the bread we are making. And, as we wait twice for it to rise, I have to have faith that something good will come from the process.

When Daniel runs off to play with his brother, I think of how much this baking day is like my Advent journey. I fumble and fall short and take on tasks that require more of me than I may be able to give. But I know what Christmas brings, and I believe that somehow I will be ready.

I have never made bread, and I don't know whether the dough needs more flour or less. But I have to trust that it will come out of the oven all right.

Suddenly I realize the recipe makes two loaves, not one. So I stretch the second ball of dough into a rectangle, spread a little melted butter on it, sprinkle it with cinnamon sugar, and roll it into a loaf. My father's mother, my Grandma Beyer, used to make cinnamon bread, and it was delicious. But I don't have her recipe. Today I have a memory and a bowl full of cinnamon sugar.

We put the loaves in the oven and wait, wondering whether our experiment will be a success. And when they come out, we marvel at how different they look--and then how good they taste.

We probably could have made better bread, but we made bread. There's something magical about the fact that we pulled together ingredients we had in the house and produced bread.

This Advent has been full of so many assorted distractions and tasks. There is never enough energy or time. Yet at the end we will reach Christmas. We will celebrate Christ's birth. Even with my imperfections and stumbling and failings, Christmas will come. And we still have a week to prepare ourselves for the Infant Jesus.

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This contribution is available at <http://catholicreview.org/blogs/open-window/2016/12/18/baking-bread-during-the-final-days-of-advent>  
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# A Renewed Life for a New Year! [at Bartimaeus' Quiet Place]

## *A Renewed New Life for the New Year!*



Christ is our New Life

***“When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. As proof that you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, “Abba, Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then also an heir, through God.” (1 Gal. 4:4-7)***

Brothers and Sisters, my fellow Pilgrims in Christ,

### ***Regarding Resolutions for the New Year***

It is common practice, for most of us in the west, to make some resolutions at the beginning of each new year that will lead to improvement our lifestyles through the removal of unhealthy habits and/or the initiation of what we may suppose are good ones that will truly bring about the desirable changes in we envision.

Unfortunately, especially for those of us who are Christians, the truth is that we always approach these attempts at personal renewal from a purely worldly viewpoint, that is, mainly to permit us to live longer and, we hope, more enjoyable and prosperous lives in today's world. Rarely, if ever, do we undertake “New Year” resolutions to improve our spiritual lives to really come to a renewed spiritual life in Christ, a union so intimate, we can without any hypocrisy, cry out “Abba or Daddy” to His Father and our Father. A union that permits us to dialog with the Divine in such way as to truly experience, in the spirit, our heritage as adopted sons of the Father and heirs of His Kingdom.

The primary reason for this secular tendency on our part, is that our life in this world remains the focus of

our reason for living. For many of us the “spiritual life” is merely a theological term that does not resonate with us as being an accessible reality. Oh yes, the songs and hymns we sing in church may stir up some pietistic emotions that we may consider as spirituality but hardly ever do we find these emotions moving us to act in faith so that the Spirit of God may transform our lives so that we can truly see the changes we know we need, so that we may escape from the enticements and lusts of the world that have such a hold on our lives.

### ***A Resolution Where God Brings You To Life – Through His Grace***

Because all of us are a composite of spirit, soul, and body we usually have a hunger for true spirituality that goes unfulfilled. The reason for this is, that although we pay great attention to the needs of our soul and body, we tend to ignore and neglect the spiritual side of our being. We mainly attempt to meet the spiritual emptiness inside of us with non-spiritual solutions for our soul and our body, without tending to our spiritual needs first.

Yes, we need to make a resolution for the New Year, but it should be a resolution to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, to yield ourselves to Him, so that He can activate our spirit, work in us to feed us with His Word, and bring us to a new life in the Spirit by conforming us daily to the Spirit of Christ that is in us through our conversion and baptism (cf., prayer to the Holy Spirit in the referenced links)

In making such a resolution we must avoid thinking that what we will be doing is a dedication of our own human efforts to enable a spiritual change in ourselves. Please understand, we have NO WAY to bring spiritual life to our selves or to others. Just as Jesus said: “Spirit begets spirit and flesh beget flesh”. True spiritual life can only come from the source of all Life, Jesus, the Word of Life. As John the Evangelist said: “In Him was Life and the Life was the light of men” (Jn.1:4), Jesus who is the Word made flesh, He is the one who brings us to life, not only in human flesh but in our spirits as well. He, and He alone, is the Door to spiritual life and, as He told us: “I am The Way The Truth, and the Life; No one comes to the Father but by me” (Jn.14:6).

So you see, our resolve must be to [yoke ourselves to Jesus](#) (Matt:11-29) and [yield ourselves to the Holy Spirit](#) for the rest of our lives. For only through Him and His Word can the Spirit of God be released in us to bring us to new life in Christ and thus satiate our spiritual hunger! Our only part in the resolve is through an act of faith in Christ, that is, an act of our will where we repent of our attachments to the world system and ask Jesus to come into our hearts and be, not only our savior, but also our Lord, and thus open the door for Him to take control of our lives through the working of the Holy Spirit. In this manner it will be the Holy Spirit working in you and through you who will effect a true living spirituality in your person to the Glory of His Name!

### ***Our Response to God’s Renewing Grace In Believing Communities***

It is the making of such a resolution that is the foundation for a sincere and true Christian life. It is a resolution that has also been the foundation of all historical Christian communities. Yes, God has provided the Graces needed for renewal through Christ, but in order to activate these Graces we must respond in Faith. That is the Challenge for all Christians and for their communities.

As an example let us look at St. Paul’s dealings with the Colossian community, whom he initially founded. He tells the community, in His letter to them, that he is constantly praying for them that they may be strengthened in Christ who will sustain them in their resolve. He does this because he knows that,

although they received the Gospel, they are struggling to extricate themselves from the pagan culture and world in which they are embedded and that they are in need of an affirmation of their faith to strengthen their resolve. Listen to the words of encouragement he gives them and take it to heart for yourselves.



***“For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.***

***He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.***

***Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.”***  
(Col. 1:9-24)

Then, to the Ephesian community, which was also struggling in being conformed to Christ, Paul exhorts them to “Put off the old nature and put on their new nature in Christ, which is, of course what yoking yourself to Christ will effect in you! Listen to Paul in his own words:

***“So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of***





[\*Hearing God's Voice, and Obeying It\*](#)

[\*Pentecost and the Promise of the Father\*](#)

[\*The Empowerment Gifts \(Part 1\)\*](#)

[\*The Empowerment Gifts \(Part 2\)\*](#)

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This contribution is available at <http://quietplace4prayer.wordpress.com/2016/12/30/s-a-renewed-life-for-a-new-year/>  
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## Requiesce in Pace, Debbie and Carrie [at Quiet Consecration]

We have lost two Hollywood heavyweights. Mother and daughter, immensely talented, flawed and strong...Debbie Reynolds and Carrie Fisher are both (I hope) on their way to heaven.

Debbie Reynolds was the star I wanted to be when I was a little girl. The grand dame of Hollywood musicals, Debbie was beautiful without being over-the-top. I loved that she could do it all - dance, sing, act - with such effortless grace. I wanted to be Debbie Reynolds. Or Bette Davis....actually I really wanted to just be a star.

Debbie's daughter Carrie Fisher was the gal with whom I shared a lot. Both of us the same age, with flawed fathers and struggles with substance abuse, Carrie found the type of success I had hoped to find but never did. Carrie, who grew up Hollywood Royalty, carved out a niche that was uniquely her own. She was an actress, an author, a woman of substance. Never afraid to confront her own demons in a public way, Carrie Fisher made it possible for others to do the same. She gave courage a face and because of her bravery others found it possible to look at those around them and say, "I am also struggling". She found herself...and never apologized for the woman she saw in the mirror.

In one of her interviews, Carrie said that if she could tell her younger self anything it was that saying "I don't know" is okay. Wise words. So many of us are afraid to do that, to just admit that we don't know everything or that we are flat out wrong about what we were so sure of even six months ago. I have certainly had a difficult time learning that lesson. For instance, this past election cycle proved to me that I really know nothing about politics. Quite frankly, my only comfort is that, apparently, I am in really good company.

Carrie found sobriety and with sobriety came the strength she needed to walk the path God made visible to her. It was not with a cost, but it also came with great triumph and she allowed the world to see into her life through her writing. The struggle was personal, private and played out on the public stage for all to see.

Sobriety started me on my path to sanity too. Once sober, it was finding my way Home to the Catholic Church that has given me the strength I need to walk the path I am on but it has not been without a cost. I am no longer sad about who or what I have lost as a result of finding my way back to the Eucharist. Just as Carrie found her voice, I have found mine. Just as she came to find peace and healing with her family, I have found mine.

I look at the great gifts both these women gave to the world and I realize how very blessed I was to grow up while they were in the world. Debbie Reynolds, a woman of strength and dignity who weathered pain and betrayal without losing her sense of humor. Carrie Fisher, a woman of grace and intelligence who walked through the storms of alcoholism and mental illness with twinkle in her eye and a love for the universe that shown through her gorgeous brown eyes.

May I remember what they taught me and smile....may I walk this path with the same spring in my step, trust in the Lord and laughter as the two of them. Help me to be the woman You made me to be, Lord...just like Debbie and Carrie.

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This contribution is available at <http://quietconsecration.blogspot.com/2016/12/requiesce-in-pace-debbie-and-carrie.html>

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# Julie at Play [at Grace to Paint]



6×8" oil paint on primed canvas sheet; illustration for a children's book on St. Julie.

I am continuing to show the pages of a future children's book on St. Julie Billiard's early life. She found it difficult to leave a game that she was involved in. The above may be an illustration in a booklet for young children.

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This contribution is available at <http://www.gracetopaint.com/2017/01/02/julie-at-play/>  
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# I learned a little about what it feels like to hold a cardboard sign on a street corner. [at Boldly Catholic]

[HugsPrayers](#)

My first "customers" were actually a pair of young people who walked up to me with big grins on their faces. She had exclaimed "Awww!" loudly upon reading my sign. He seemed less enthused yet still willing. As they approached, she asked with a grin, "Can we do a group hug?" I said absolutely and so we hugged briefly, exchanged Merry Christmases and carried on.

Getting past that first encounter settled my nerves a bit and also, quite naturally, drew attention. It wasn't long until I had a second person approach me. She introduced herself as Keisha and asked if I'd pray for her family. Willingly, I offered a quick prayer, she smiled shyly at its end and then walked away.

I became more relaxed.

Many of those walking by were overtly averting their eyes, not wanting to allow me into their space, into the hustle and bustle this season brings into people's worlds. I was absolutely ok with this. After all, many of us mistrust, suspect, even judge men with cardboard signs on busy street corners. I certainly do.

Occasionally, I would cry out to the averters within earshot and say simply, I'm not here for your money, I'm simply looking for people who need hugs or prayers or both. Some would pretend I had not been heard. Others would look my way quickly then just as quickly look away. A few would smile and one or two, without stopping, would simply say, yes, pray for me. And I would.

One large middle aged black man did stop. He asked, very quietly, if I would pray for his family. And so I did. When finished, he shook my hand firmly and said thank you, his eyes reflecting a deep sadness. I was moved by his countenance. His shoulders were stooped as if carrying a great weight. I pray for him even now as I type these words.

An older woman, silver hair glistening, asked if I'd pray for her family. I fired a prayer flare for her and her loved ones. She made my day by thanking me profusely and saying that more people should do what I was doing.

Then there was a gentleman who introduced himself as Aaron. He stopped, pointed at me with both hands and exclaimed, "You are the man!" He asked for prayer and when we were done, he firmly clasped my right hand in both of his own and thanked me for what I was doing. Later he walked by a second time, this time without stopping, but again pointing at me with both fingers and saying "You are the man!". A short time later, he drove by and honked his horn, pointing at me once more. He made me smile.

One woman came up to me and attempted to hand me what appeared to be a rolled up \$20 bill. I told her no thanks, that I wasn't looking to receive anything from anyone but to instead give, and in this case, give hugs or prayers or both. She smiled, taken aback, and after mouthing "Oh!", walked away, clearly bewildered by the encounter.

And on that brief time went.

I learned a little about what it feels like to hold a cardboard sign on a street corner. I learned a lot more about giving way to an inner prompting and being rewarded by it. And I learned that indeed, it is more blessed to give than to receive, even in the giving of something simple and seemingly cheap.

I will likely do this again one day.

\*Note - This was written and published on my old blog back in December of 2013. I have not yet repeated the act.

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## Wrapped [at bukas palad]



Year A / Christmas / Christmas Day

Readings Isaiah 52.7-10 / Psalm 97.1,2-3ab, 3cd-4, 5-6 (R/v 3) / Hebrews 1.1-6 / John 1.1-5, 9-14

Have you ever wondered about the paper that wraps our Christmas gifts?

Its color delights us. Its design makes us smile. But we're more eagerly focused on the gift. We shake it and feel it, sometimes we smell it, to try and guess what the wrapping paper and trimmings hide. At best, the wrapping paper completes the whole package making it Christmassy. Almost all us, especially children, then simply rip and tear and pull apart the wrapping paper to get to the gift.

It's all about the gift, isn't it? The paper is useless—simply decorative, simply ornamental, simply unimportant. No one pays much attention to it. After it is ripped and torn apart, it's useless. It's done its job. It's thrown away.

Don't we throw away much more than Christmas wrapping paper in our lives? Throw away someone else's forgiveness, care and love by being ungrateful and uncharitable in return. Throw away ordinary things and moments that are our daily bread by believing that the expensive, the superficial, the passing provide. Throw away countless opportunities for a fuller, happier life by being calculative, jealous, miserable, frighten. Yes, may be, even throw way God and God's wishes for us, now and again, by insisting that our self-centered, self-righteous, self-preserving ways are best. And don't we sometimes feel like thrown away paper—unappreciated, undervalued, unloved?

Today, we celebrate Jesus' birth. In him, God reminds us that we are meant for God, not to be thrown away because of sin and cast into the dung heap of death. **God gives us Jesus as our hope-filled joy that we are his.** How does God do this? We hear it in our gospel reading: "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (John 1.14).

Christian scripture, song and art always presents the new born Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes. **But God became human, like you and me, by wrapping himself in human skin.** It is in human skin first and foremost that our God wraps himself up to dwell amongst so as to love us and to serve us in Jesus.

Does this shock you? That God wrapped in human skin? Wrapped himself in human skin, so prone to disease and death, to sinfulness and evil? What can it mean for us that God choose to wrap himself in human skin? Nothing more, nothing less than the goodness of human skin, our skin, for God.

In birth, Jesus reveals the glory of God as fullness of grace of who we are to God. By wrapping himself in human skin, God acknowledges that it is frail, and that our humanity can be as sinful as it can be saintly, but more than this, that **we are in our skin, warts and all, always good enough for God.** Jesus coming daily into our lives proclaims this.

In birth, Jesus also reveals the glory of God in the truth of who God is and how God wants to interact with us. God wishes to be with us, not throw us away. God desires this because "everything in Jesus speaks of God's mercy; nothing in him is devoid of God's compassion" for us (Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 8). By choosing to wrap himself up in our skin, so often scarred by infirmity and weakness, yet also traced with hopes and joys, **God very clearly wants to get involve with and in our lives.**

By meeting us in human skin, God in Jesus allows us to meet him in our skin. We can touch him, as we can also speak with him, hear him, see him, know him, live with him. Yes, God has come to us in Jesus to abide in us, so that we can abide in him (John 15.4). This indeed is reason for Christmas celebration because as Paul writes in his letter to the Hebrews it is now in our time that God no longer speaks in partial and various ways, through prophets of old, but fully through Jesus who comes to redeem us for God (Hebrews 1.1-3).

Part of exchanging gifts is acknowledging what we receive. We say "thank you". We shake hands in thanksgiving. We give an embrace in appreciation. We kiss in the love of being loved, and we smile in gratefulness.

God gives Himself to us in Jesus. He is God's gift. We visibly represent this in the baby Jesus in the manger. As we stand or kneel before Jesus in the manger, what will we say or do to express thanks? How shall we respond to God who comes to us wrapped in our very skin?

Many will welcome Jesus with words of thanksgiving and greet him with praise. Some will ask for graces such as the grace to be generous and make promises to follow and serve better.

There is another way to acknowledge God's gift of Jesus. An Ignatian way. Anyone who has done the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola would have prayed the final contemplation. It invites us to love God and love others more in deeds than in words.

A deed we can make this Christmas is to **let Jesus wrap us in God's very skin**. And what is God's skin but love? In the Letter to the Colossians, Paul urges Christians to put on love, God's love that binds all together in perfect unity (Colossians 3.14). To put on such love, you and I must wrap ourselves in the very skin of God, God who is Love and Love that is God's way to live.

Does it scare you to want to put on God's skin and make it your own? I think you, like me, are afraid because we honestly know how unworthy we are to do this and how weak we are to accomplish it.

Jesus however can do this for us. So, let us be audacious as we humble ourselves before Jesus in the manger, and beg him to wrap us anew in God. Let us have the holy boldness to plead for this from him in whom God has redeemed, transformed, and made whole again human skin, our skin. Indeed, let us be as confident as St Irenaeus who understands that **Jesus' coming brings all the newness for us to live with God more fully, more hopefully, more joyfully**.

**If God wraps himself in human skin in Jesus, then it is only in Jesus that we will be enfolded into God's skin**. In Jesus, God touches humanity in skin that enfleshes God's mercy, God's love, God's life. In Jesus, God calls us to do likewise. This is why every time we reach out in Jesus' name to touch another's skin, especially, skin we fear because of disease and colour, difference and vice, corruption and sinfulness, we let him wrap us more and more in the love of God.

I believe we all want to live and serve like Jesus. But we struggle because we are so wrapped up in our

own skin. We need new skin, God's skin, to wrap us anew. At Christmas, God becomes what we are in order to make us what he is himself. *To make us what he is himself*—there is no other way this can happen unless we take on God's skin, take on his love so as to love like him. This is how human skin can be stretched, reshaped, made new by Jesus who comes so that "we become fully human...by letting God bring us beyond ourselves" (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 8).

At the manger, then, let us offer ourselves as gifts to God, not perfect, not saintly, but just as we are. Let us let Jesus wrap us up for God, wrap us in nothing better than in the same human skin he has wrapped himself in—skin that he has redeemed and renewed through the Incarnation. For, like the wiser, older family ones who gingerly peel back the scotch tape to save the wrapping paper for another gift, another occasion, let us let God save us and use us anew. Yes, this action is also what Christmas joy must be about: **that today God makes all things we throw away very valuable again in Jesus.**

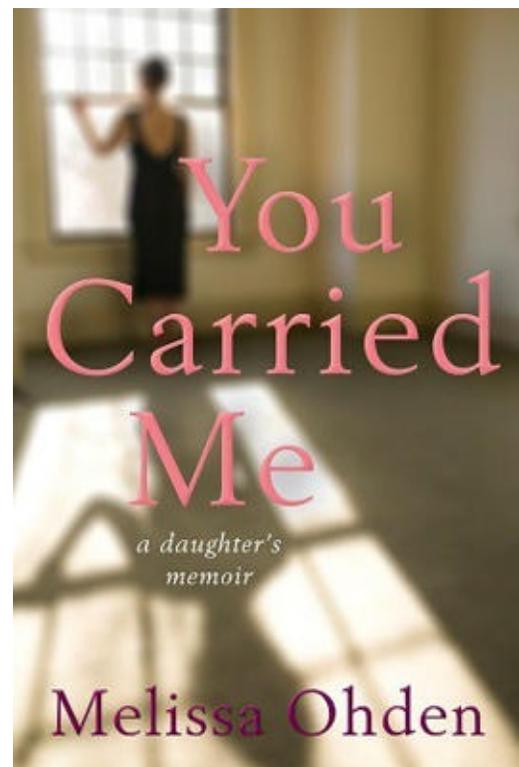
*Preached at St Ignatius Parish, Singapore* photo: from the Internet (scripture for today. bloodspot.com)

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# You Carried Me: a daughter's memoir by Melissa Ohden [at The Koala Mom]



**Our birth stories are a significant part of who we are.** I remember cringing every time my mom told my birth story. In it, I'm to blame for her 12-hour labour and subsequent emergency C-section. My older two girls love it when we drive past the hospitals where they were born. And so I can completely understand how Melissa Ohden's life fell apart when she found out, at age 14, that she was the survivor of a failed abortion.

Melissa grew up in a happy adoptive family. She knew both she and her older sister were adopted. However, when she found out *why* she was adopted, her world went into a tail spin. Melissa turned to alcohol and boys to overcome the pain of nearly being killed by her birth mother. Slowly, however, the message of the church she grew up in shines through. By the end of her teens, Melissa has started to find healing—and to look for her birth family.

***You Carried Me: A Daughter's Memoir* is the amazing story of Melissa's journey from failed abortion to reconciliation with her birth mother.** I was hooked from the very first pages. Melissa has a



natural, interesting writing style that drew me into her amazing story.

She shares her life without anger or blame, even when she finds out the truth about what happened at her birth. Her ability to forgive and find healing is powerful and beautiful.

The compelling human interest story, and the sensitivity with which Ohden personalizes issues such as adoption and women's rights, will appeal to readers regardless of their views. This is not a pro-life or pro-choice book, nor is it overtly religious: one family's story highlights the complexity of the issue and will leave readers with more compassion for every woman impacted by abortion. For too long, discussion of abortion has been dominated by male politicians. It's time for individual women impacted by abortion to have their voices heard. Melissa Ohden breaks the taboo that silences too many women, empowering others to share their own stories and reclaim the narrative.

**Melissa Ohden has a Master's Degree in Social Work.** She has worked in the fields of substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence and sexual assault counseling, and child welfare. Melissa has been a speaker with Feminists for Life and is the former Patron of Real Choices Australia. She has testified in the Australian Parliament and before the U.S. Congress. Melissa is on the Board of Directors for the Vitae Foundation, a national organization which uses media to advance a culture of life. In 2012, Melissa founded The Abortion Survivors Network (ASN). Since ASN's inception, Melissa has been in contact with over 206 survivors. She and her husband have two daughters. For more information about Melissa, [drop by her website](#).

**Plough Publishing is giving away 5 hardcover copies of Melissa's autobiography! Drop by [the contest page](#) to enter to win.**

For more resources about adoption, check out [One Family's Adoption Story](#). If you enjoy Melissa's autobiography, you may also enjoy [Finding Sarah Finding Me](#), a birth mother's story about reconciliation with her daughter.

*I received this book for review courtesy of the publisher; all opinions expressed are my own.*



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This contribution is available at <http://thekoalamom.com/2017/01/daughters-memoir-melissa-ohden/>  
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## Happy New Year - Superstition or the Workings of God? [at Catholic Conundrum]



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It's a good thing I'm not superstitious. Or am I? The last day of 2016 and first day of 2017 have been mixed with a concoction of unusual and odd circumstances. I couldn't even remember them all at this point, but there were enough eye-brow raising moments to conjure up thoughts like "Is this an indicator as to what this new year will be like?" to waft through my mind.

New Year's Eve had already been a bit nuts, but nothing compared to my wait in line at a local store. I should have known something about that particular line would be off when several customers in front of me were unable to have the tax taken off of their receipt for exemption purposes. The poor cashier had tried everything, finally calling over a manager to help, who was also unable to remedy the situation. Then the trend continued: products dropped off of the line, money fell out of the cashier's hand and she had to hunt for it, etc. until my turn came up. She picked up my peanut butter, ran it across the scanner and breathed out in frustration as the computer informed her that there was no such product at the store. Exasperated, she went to grab her information card that hangs above the register so that she could type in the code, but stopped when her hand reached the bare metal pole.

"Where's my card?"

"Seriously? Who took my card?" She looked at me, shaking her head. I couldn't help but chuckle. This whole normal checkout procedure was turning into a main event. Running over to the next line, she took note of the code, ran back and began to type it in. Probably because she was unnerved, she couldn't remember it completely, so she quickly ran back to get it again.

She continued on with the few products that I had when she scanned a frozen item and started to bag it. Suddenly, the scanner starting beeping, ringing up that same product 7 more times. She stared at me with her eyes opened wide. I couldn't take it at that point. I felt so sorry for her but could not stop the laugh that escaped me.

"Why are you laughing?" Instantly, I felt guilty, and I explained that I had to laugh because it was just too funny. To my relief, she started to laugh with me. She tried to ring up the frozen item again, only to find that she had to void 4 more scans.

"I think you have a phantom line," I said, knowing I wasn't telling her something she didn't already know.

"I really need to go home!!" she agreed.

We chatted about her crazy day so far as she went to reach for some of the final products on the line. As her hand reached to down to pick up a green pepper, she froze, her eyes the size of saucers. My eyes were probably the size of dinner plates as I looked at my once perfect pepper, now neatly sliced down the middle, both sides lying on belt.

"If I were you, I would leave right now and go home," I managed in a whisper.

"Yeah," was all she could say.

We finished up and I walked away, but not before I said a quiet prayer for her and her "phantom line."

I know that we all have strange days like that, but the odd and unusual continued to occur the next day, including the bizarre entanglement of my son's drone in my hair, as well as the highly unlikely event of an unexpected hatching of chicks in our coop as we were leaving to spend time with family for the day.

After we had set them up in the house with heat, food and water, we left - late, of course.

As I said, thoughts of our upcoming new year kept passing through my mind, and I mentioned one of these thoughts to my daughter in the car, only half-joking.

So much for not being superstitious! Hearing my thoughts out loud, I felt embarrassed. Having just celebrated the Feast of Mary, Mother of God, I knew that all things that happen are known by our Great God, and all things have their purpose, even the weird and unexplainable.

Our beautiful Mother understands this all too well! Talk about going through weird and unusual things! I need to be more like her - docile to workings of the Holy Spirit, accepting and approaching all things in my life with the eyes of love and faith.

These last two days have been good wake-up calls for me. I hope I can remember this as the inevitable

odd and unusual happen throughout the coming year! :)

And I truly pray that our Blessed Mother inspires you and our Great God blesses you in this new calendar year of 2017!!

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This contribution is available at <http://www.catholicconundrum.com/blog/happy-new-year-superstition-or-the-workings-of-god>

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## Faith Takes Flight [at Little Douglings]

Last week I was away visiting my sister in Denver. I brought my 7 month old, while my husband stayed back with our other ten children - evidence of his saintliness.

At the airport, people commented on how busy I must be with a baby in tow. I had a good chuckle.

On the flight home, I was seated first and waited eagerly to see who would be the brave soul who would willingly choose to sit beside the lady with the baby. It was a young international student from Kenya who smiled brilliantly. He introduced himself and asked about the baby. I asked him if he had siblings back home. He said there were nine of them and waited for my mouth to drop. I told him that I was holding baby number eleven and watched his mouth drop instead.

In the course of our conversation, the young man revealed he was a devout Muslim and that he was upset by the misconception of his religion. He said that he was tired of a small percentage of radicals attempting to define the religion as a whole. I told him I thought that was unfair and that I understood. "How can you?" he asked, "If I had worn traditional Muslim attire today, many people on this plane would look at me in fear, making the worst assumptions." I told him that I had many friends who were priests and that following the abuse scandals, some were yelled at by complete strangers who blamed them for the terrible actions of the small percentage of offenders. People were afraid to let their children anywhere near them and many wrote off the Catholic Church as a whole. "Most priests are good men who have laid down their lives in service to God, but when a few commit odious acts, sadly all those affiliated with that particular religion bear the weight of condemnation in the eyes of the public."

He nodded solemnly. He asked about the Christian faith. He appreciated our common history, Abraham, our mutual Father of Faith, and many stories in scripture, but found it hard to understand The Trinity. I assured him that it was hard for anyone to understand The Trinity - that its reality was shrouded in mystery. He looked confused, "Then how can you believe it? I love learning about other faiths, but this concept of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit leaves me baffled."

I took a moment to ask the Holy Spirit to guide my thoughts and words.

There are many components of the faith that at first appear baffling. If you want to understand the Christian faith, I think the journey often starts differently than with some other faiths. The Christian faith is not necessarily learning about something, but more so, meeting someone and ultimately finding yourself in a deeply intimate relationship that seems to defy human logic. I'm a Christian because I love Christ. With every fabric of my being, I long to unite myself to Him. I talk to Him continuously throughout the day, and though it may seem impossible, I can feel His presence, I know He hears me and He often answers in ways that leave me in no doubt of His immense love for me. Studying Holy Scripture only fuels my love for Him, and my gratitude in recognizing how He has sought the hearts of mankind since the earliest times. The teachings of my faith are given as a means of helping me live life to the fullest without allowing the great burden of sin to permanently steal the spark from my eyes and weigh down my heart. The Christian faith has brought me to a place where I can see the inherent dignity in each person. I see their value. I see how they are loved unconditionally by Christ and I am compelled to love them too. If you are really looking to investigate the Christian faith, it begins with an honest, open prayer: "Christ, if You are real

and if You are really seeking me, please reveal the truth to my heart. Help me come to know You. Help me to experience Your love for me."

He thought for a moment. "This is a very different approach. I feel that I have learned a great deal through my faith. I have sacrificed much for the sake of Allah and I have sought truth. I will continue to seek truth." I saw so much goodness and beauty in him. "I know you'll find it." I said.

He smiled and shook his head, "I have never had a conversation about religion like this one before." I agreed that it was pretty unique.

I always feel somewhat inadequate when it comes to speaking about the faith, but Christ was able to inspire hope and wonder in the hearts of the wise men looking to the skies. He was able to win their hearts even as a tiny babe, so I trust that if He wills it, He can call someone at ten thousand feet within the skies in the least coveted seat beside the lady with the baby.

Wishing you many blessings as you approach the crèche this Christmas - as you find the source of all goodness, beauty and truth.

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This contribution is available at <http://www.littledouglings.com/blog/2016/12/19/faith-takes-flight>  
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## I'm Back, and Life Will Never Be the Same [at String of Pearls]

If you've been checking in here and wondering why it's been almost a month since I last posted something at String of Pearls, there's a very good reason for my hiatus. On November 25, my dad passed away. We had known that he was probably terminal, but were hopeful that his chemo treatments were going to buy him some time--even a year or two, according to the best case scenario. On November 21, however, he got very sick and had to be admitted to the ER; that very day, he got the devastating news that his leukemia was not responding to the chemo and he had at most a week or two to live.



Dad had previously thought he wanted to die at home, and we were preparing to be trained by hospice so that we could fulfill his wishes; but he ultimately chose to spend his last days at the hospital. I believe it helped him to keep from getting anxious, having all that medical staff nearby.

However, it was anything but lonely there for him. Every day, it was like there was a party in his room, with talking, laughter, food and drink. He was always surrounded by loved ones: his wife, his sister, his kids, his grandkids, and even a few of his great-grandkids were there with him, so that he was never alone. And it was simply an amazing time--joy-filled in its way, if you can believe that. As one of my sisters said, it was like we were having a big Irish wake...but the guest of honor actually got to be present to party along with everyone else.



Dad's doctors even allowed him his nightly after-dinner glass of Tia Maria (which he hid under his tray whenever the nurses came around, even though it was written right on his chart that he was allowed to have it!).





Dad ("Bigfoot" to his grandkids and great-grandkids) was completely lucid and fully engaged with those around him, telling lots of stories and even jokes; he kept his sense of humor until the very end. "How are you doing, Leon?" a nurse would ask; and he would chuckle and respond with a wry, "I've been better." Here's an excerpt from my Christmas newsletter, just to give you an idea of what my father's passing was like: *A whole bunch of us (including his beloved wife, his three daughters and their husbands, a number of grandchildren, and three of his ten great-grandchildren) brought a lasagna dinner to the hospital and celebrated Thanksgiving with him: he smiled and raised his after-dinner glass of Tia Maria for a toast; he regaled us with stories of his first date with my mom and their short courtship before he asked her to marry him. Then just hours later, not long after midnight, he died with a brown scapular around his neck as we stood around his bed, praying and laying our hands on him. He was enjoying the company of his family almost to his last moments, and he did not suffer. His was the holiest, the most peaceful death one could ever imagine. You couldn't script a more perfect passing from this earthly life to the eternal one. God love him; he had a hard life in many ways, but was also very blessed and never took his blessings for granted. I hope Dad's enjoying a beautiful Christmas in Heaven, most especially with the father he lost when he was only six. May he rest in peace!*

Dad died one day shy of his 82nd birthday. He really wanted to make it to the 26th, but God had other plans for his birthday celebration. I have so much to say about my dad's last days and hours, so much I want to write down and post here because I feel it absolutely must be shared. But I have been suffering from the most severe writer's block I have ever experienced. There is so much to say, and I fear that no matter how hard I try, I won't be able to do the story justice. But in the days to come, I'm going to force myself to sit in front of this computer and try to get it all down, while the details are still fresh enough in my mind. I don't want to forget one minute of it...but actually, if I live to be 100, I don't think I could ever forget it. The experience of watching my dad face the end of his earthly life with such courage and peace was profoundly life-changing for me.

I had our Christmas cards printed up months ago, because for once we were ahead of the game: we had a great family picture, with--miracle of miracles!--

*all 18 of us*

together (including all 7 grandchildren), since we'd had the forethought to have a professional photographer take pictures during our week-long family reunion this summer at our Oyster Haven retreat on Lake Champlain. But I haven't had the heart to finally start addressing the envelopes and getting them

in the mail. Today, I am forcing myself to do so.



And in the coming days, I will post more about my father and his extraordinary passing from his earthly life to his eternal one. Until then, God bless you and yours throughout this holiday season and always.

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This contribution is available at <http://mumsie2five.blogspot.com/2016/12/im-back-and-life-will-never-be-same.html>  
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## Are You Saved ? [at Catholic365]

The difference between Catholics and Protestants is that they see faith as something that they can measure. Therefore, they claim to be saved by faith alone. I'm reminded of the question that faith alone people ask faith and works people. "How many works do you need to perform to be saved?" There are faith and works people outside of Catholicism. So, I don't know how they feel about this question. But I can tell you that the question is completely foreign to Catholics, because we are taught not to judge our faith nor our works. We leave the question of who is saved, to God.

Faith alone people suffer with two false assumptions.

1. That they have the right to declare themselves saved.
2. That they have the ability to measure their faith.

Thus, they assume that everybody lives with those assumptions. But we, Catholics, don't. The proof is very easy to discover. Ask a Catholic, any Catholic, whether he is saved. His answer will invariably be, "I don't know." Why? Because God is our Judge.

1 Corinthians 4:4 I am not conscious of anything against me, but I do not thereby stand acquitted; the one who judges me is the Lord. 5 Therefore, do not make any judgment before the appointed time, until the Lord comes, for he will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will manifest the motives of our hearts, and then everyone will receive praise from God.

The reason that faith alone people ask this question is because they are used to judging themselves saved. Even though this is an unbiblical attitude. But, the question can easily be turned around on them. I ask them in turn, "How much faith do you need in order to be saved and how do you measure it? Can you read anyone's heart? Can you even read your own?" Here's what Scripture says on that question:

Jeremiah 17: More torturous than anything is the human heart, beyond remedy; Who can understand it? **10 I, the LORD, explore the mind; and test the heart,** Giving to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their deeds

*As for me, I don't even try to read my own heart nor anyone else's. I leave that to God.*

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This contribution is available at <http://www.catholic365.com/article/5624/faith-alone-people-suffer-with-two-false-assumptions.html>  
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## What if God spoke to you in a dream? [at Walking the Path]



Today's Gospel passage provokes some profound questions. What if Joseph cast Mary out of his life, exposing her to public ridicule and possibly public stoning for the sin of adultery? What do couples married and unmarried do themselves when informed of an unexpected pregnancy? What if God spoke to me in a dream commanding me to take an action that seemed entirely inconsistent with reality?

I really don't want to know about the answer to the first question as it frightens me to ponder a world without our Savior. The second question can only be answered with alarming statistics of abortions, of live births and from evidence from those we know proceeded with pregnancies welcoming the will of God into their life-giving decision. We must continue to pray for all of those who face these decisions that God will send the Holy Spirit into their life so that the gift of life may be preserved as well as for those who have made the decision to end life.

The final question is equally profound. Throughout the Bible we encounter figures of whom God has spoken to and who carry out his will, some initially question these appearances and the message and others who take immediate action. If only discerning the voice of God was as easy, as my own head is full of thousands of voices each vying for my attention.

So what made it so clear for Joseph? From what little is known about him, he was honorable and a man of God. He was reassured not to be afraid in the dream and perhaps with that security it made it easier for him to make a decision. One can assume with a message in a dream that proclaims that his wife was to give birth to one who would save his people from their sins, that taking any other action then what was instructed would bring on severe consequences.

God does not have to speak to us in dreams although for me it might be helpful. I always think of the George Burns classic, "Oh God." The clear voice of God instructing the character to do this or that. For me God is more subtle, speaking through those around me, through Scripture and sometimes with a small but quiet voice reminding me about some action I am going take. I really don't want God to speak to me through dreams because I might be asked to make a life altering decision and I am comfortable with my life as it is. But as we know our plans are not God's plans. Just thinking of my own dreams, many of which were about personal success and glory, and of which remain unrealized helps me understand this. Taking the example of the modest poor couple who brought our Savior into the world I can open my heart to the will of God, through silence, prayer, and love. Then perhaps I might hear that voice in a dream.

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This contribution is available at <http://walkingthepathtoholiness.blogspot.com/2016/12/what-if-god-spoke-to-you-in-dream.html>

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## Six Disney Songs for Advent Dance Parties [at Sacrifice of Love]

I love the liturgical year, and I love celebrating according to the current season. So, during Advent, I really like to listen to Advent music. While Advent music is wonderful and awesome, a lot of my *favorite* Advent music happens to be chant. But, as much as I love chant, it's not my #1 pick for spontaneous dance parties while making dinner or cleaning the apartment. I happen to love listening to music from Disney movies, so I decided that I needed a special playlist of Disney music for Advent.

After all, if you're going to dance while cooking pasta, why not put on music that can slightly fit some themes of the current liturgical season?



### Disney Songs for Advent Dance Parties

[ndnyninia.blogspot.com](http://ndnyninia.blogspot.com)

#### **"For the First Time in Forever," *Frozen***

Princess Anna is *so excited* for the upcoming coronation! She whirls around in disbelief and excitement, knowing that her life will change. Joy and fellowship will enter her home!

*"Cause for the first time in forever*

*There'll be music, there'll be light*

*For the first time in forever*

*I'll be dancing through the night"*

As we hear her gush about salad plates, chocolate, and the future, we can think about our own preparations: stockpiling (or eating) chocolate, setting up an Advent wreath, wrapping Christmas presents. We can also think about the spiritual preparations that we can (and should) make as we await the birth of the King of Kings. Will we prepare ourselves to truly rejoice-from the depths of our hearts-in the birth of Christ?

#### **"Someday My Prince Will Come," *Snow White***

The typical preschool-aged child probably thinks his is some lovey-dovey song that a princess sings in front of a bunch of dwarfs. While this is true, when I hear "Someday My Prince Will Come," I also think of the *parousia*, when Christ will come at the end of time.

*"Some day my prince will come  
Some day I'll find my love  
And how thrilling that moment will be  
When the prince of my dreams comes to me"*

We have it way better than Snow White, though. While she had a dreamy vision of a two-dimensional, fictional prince, we have a God whose love for us is so deep and intense that He sent His Son to die a horrible death and then rise, so that we may be united with Him in Heaven. And during this Advent, we can prepare ourselves for the day when those who have chosen to live for Christ will go "further up and further in" and delight in the eternal glories of Heaven and intense union with God.

### **"Be Our Guest," *Beauty and the Beast***

Imagine: You are a servant who is stuck under enchantments, growing "flabby, fat and lazy" as you 'lie around the castle." It's dark, gloomy, and you're "not whole without a soul to wait upon." Suddenly, Belle appears and changes your life-and future-dramatically.

*"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who lived in a land of gloom a light has shone." ~Is 9:1*

When word spreads that a woman has appeared, the delightful array of servants at the castle spring into action, bubbling, brewing, cleaning, and preparing to make Belle at home. This reminds me very much of Advent. We light the Advent candle and think about the Light who is coming into the darkness of our world. We clean, bake, and scurry around so that our homes will be ready to celebrate and receive the Christ Child at Christmas. We should prepare ourselves so that on Christmas, we can look into the manger and say to God, with a heartfelt prayer, "Be my guest."

### **"Almost There," *Princess and the Frog***

We're almost there! We're almost at Christmas. We need to keep up with our Advent practices (or start the ones that we've been meaning to start) because we're almost there!

*"Trials and tribulations  
I've had my share  
There ain't nothin' gonna stop me now  
'Cause I'ma almost there"*

So when we can't find the Advent candles, the rolls burn, or we discover that we're behind on Advent devotions like the Jesse Tree, let Tiana's words encourage you, and push through to Christmas-because you're *almost there!*

**"Go the Distance," *Hercules***

This song just speaks so much to my heart about our longing for Heaven, our willingness to journey through the hardships of life-and Advent-to come to a deeper unity with Christ. With our eyes on the manger in Bethlehem, where we will see Christ on Christmas, we need to endure all that comes in Advent-the hardships and trials of daily life, the joys of preparation, the stresses of accomplishing tasks or dealing with relatives-and we can sing with Hercules,

*"I'll be there someday, I can go the distance  
I will find my way if I can be strong  
I know every mile would be worth my while  
When I go the distance, I'll be right where I belong"*

However, journeying through Advent to adore Christ at Bethlehem is way more epic than travelling to a mythological Mount Olympus, and Heaven will be intensely more epic, so we have every reason in the world to be willing to journey through the trials of life and pursue God!

**"God Help the Outcasts," *The Hunchback of Notre Dame***

As I listen to Esmeralda's anguished cries, I find myself thinking of all of the people in Sacred Scripture-Jews, rejects, prophets-longing for God, crying out to God, waiting and hoping for the Messiah.

*"God help the outcasts  
Hungry from birth  
Show them the mercy  
They don't find on earth"*

During this liturgical season, we wait and long for the coming of Christ. We cry out to him from the darkness of the winter, the darkness of our world. We hold onto the hope and joy of His merciful love, as we wait for the celebration of His birth. And, remembering how Our Lord was rejected here on Earth, we can become motivated to go out and be a witness of love to those who are cast away from their families or society.

***Advent is such an amazing, blessed time to draw near to God and others, and I love looking at ways that we can integrate all aspects of life as we focus someday being fully united with God! I love that***

***during Advent, I can change up my dance party playlist to incorporate songs that touch on the longing and journey we make through life. This list is not exhaustive, and I'm sure there are so many other fantastic Disney songs out there for Advent, so feel free to share your ideas!***

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This contribution is available at <http://marianninja.blogspot.com/2016/12/six-disney-songs-for-advent-dance.html>  
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## What I'm up to these days [at CruceSignatiBlog]

Final exams are finished, thanks be to God!

However, I can't make the trek back home yet, as my practicum project has a Christmas Eve service that I need to be at. So in spite of the fact that I'll be going home ON Christmas Day, I'm enjoying the break and the time to relax by myself for now. I've got a knitting project on the go, as well as some books to read. One is a biography of St. Jean Marie Vianney by Francis Trochu and the other is a book on the Eucharist entitled *Jesus: Our Eucharistic Love* by Fr. Stefano Manelli. In addition to his own personal thoughts, he uses many quotes from the saints and Scripture to emphasize the beauty and greatness of this sacrament. An excerpt (from page 37):

When Jesus is mine, the whole Church rejoices: the Church in Heaven, in Purgatory, and on earth. Who can express the joy the angels and saints feel at every Holy Communion worthily received? A new current of love enters Paradise and a new delight comes to the blessed spirits every time a creature unites himself devoutly to Jesus, to possess Him and be possessed by Him. A Holy Communion is of much greater value than an ecstasy, a rapture, or a vision. Holy Communion transports the whole of Paradise into my poor heart!

I've been taking this book to Mass with me and spending some time prior to Mass reading and reflecting on God's Love of mankind. In Advent and at Christmastime we remember how God loved the world so much that He sent His Son to become Man and die for our sake. Jesus' meekness at His birth in Bethlehem was only the beginning of His life of humility, and that humility is likewise made manifest in the Eucharist. The Son of God, King of Heaven and Earth, and Messiah of God's people becomes present on our altars at Mass and even more! He enters our very selves when we receive Him in Holy Communion. Truly, He is *Emmanuel*.

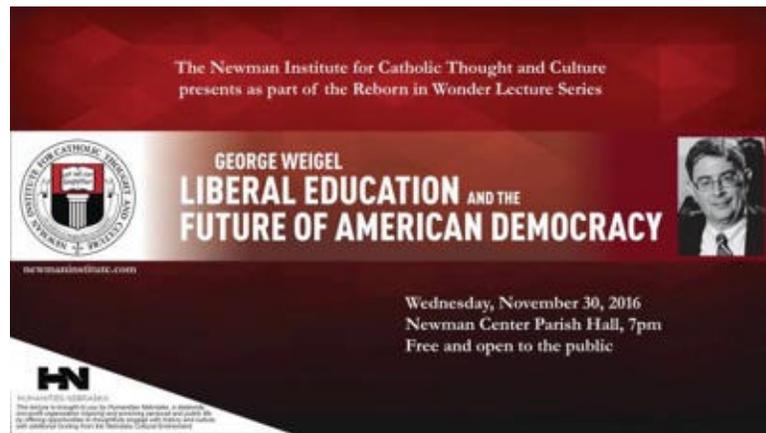
I'm not even halfway through this book, but I cannot recommend it enough. It's a terrific read for anyone who wants to grow closer to Our Lord through reflection and meditation on the love of God. The Mystical Body and Blood of Our Lord is the nearest to Heaven that we can get during our life on earth, so I encourage you to think about this next time you receive Holy Communion.

Until next time, peace be with you and God bless!

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This contribution is available at <http://crucesignatiblog.wordpress.com/2016/12/21/what-im-up-to-these-days/>  
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# Reviving the Classic Liberal Arts Education: what I heard at George Weigel's lecture in Lincoln [at Mere Observations]



On November 30th I had just arrived home from a long day at work when a good friend sent me a text inviting me to attend a lecture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Newman Center. It was to be the final of four in the “[Reborn in Wonder](#)” series and since I’d had to miss the other three despite wanting to go, I accepted the invitation. Ninety minutes later Tom and I were in our seats in the second row. I learned afterwards from one of the organizers that the room sat 240, but with the people also standing at the back and sides the crowd was estimated at just over 250 people. The crowd was a mixture of college students, priests and religious sisters, as well as many interested laypeople. I saw and spoke with several of my peers afterwards. There were children present as well, and the front row just ahead of me contained five siblings ranging from I’d estimate early elementary to early high school in age.

For those not familiar with George Weigel you can read his [Wikipedia entry](#). He is both a respected author and one of the leading Catholic intellectual voices of our age. I own four of his books and flirted with the idea of bringing one to be autographed but ultimately decided against it. As it turned out I should have as he signed a few after the lecture.

After an introduction courtesy of Professor John Freeh, Doctor of Philosophy, Mr. Weigel began the night by citing some recent survey stats. My apologies as I didn’t catch the source:

- 35% of Millennials believe that George W. Bush killed more people than Stalin
- Only 1/3 of Dutch young people thought it essential to live in a democratic state
- Less than 30% of US young people thought the same
- 35% of US population are Millennials, but those same Millennials comprise just 19% of the electorate



George Weigel

After establishing a bit of where we are now, he proceeded into the heart of his talk and what he called “The Revival of the Classic Liberal Arts Education”.

To start, he listed, defined and discussed Five Toxins/Solvents that are eating away at civilization.

1. Gnosticism
2. Skepticism
3. Moral Relativism
4. Radical Individualism
5. The Will to Power as the center of the human condition. This in turn leads to “A Regime of Coercion”

Weigel also described the “Three-Legged Stool of Western Civilization”

1. Jerusalem
2. Athens
3. Rome

**Jerusalem:** brought us the school of thought that said life is a journey, an adventure, a pilgrimage, and that life is NOT random. Here he mentioned the experiences and lessons of the Book of Exodus.

**Athens:** taught that there are truths. That human reason can grasp them in an orderly way. The “Principle of Non-Contradiction” was discussed.

**Rome:** taught us that the Rule of Law is superior to brute force when governing (even though they were also known to ignore this at times in their history).

By the 11th century the three legs had produced what we know as the Civilization of the West in which the Dignity of the Human Person was emphasized. This also ultimately led to the birth of the Democratic Project.

In the 19th century those three legs begin to be kicked out from under the stool.



The first leg to be kicked out was Jerusalem.

- The project of Atheistic Humanism
- The God of the Bible as the enemy of human liberation and maturation. (This is ironic as God had entered into history as a Liberator as opposed to the gods of Egypt, Greece, etc., with their demands, child sacrifice, and treatment of persons as “chess pieces” to be lead around a cosmic game board.

The second leg to be removed was the Athenian leg.

- If no rationality is built into the world...no *Logos*...then reason left to its own devices turns on itself.
- The result: there is “your truth” and there is “my truth.” A view dominant in so many philosophy departments in universities today.

The final leg, left on its own, will then collapse. Thus the Rome leg and our entire stool was brought down.

- If there is no truth, and no horizon of judgement, then I’ll impose my will on you or vice-versa.
- This is known as “Coercion of the Will” (or Will to Power)
- Students shutting down free speech on campuses, for example.
- He referred to modern universities as “expensive daycare centers”, a term that elicited laughter from the crowd.

All of this, he said, is auto-constructed self-deconstruction. In other words, we’ve done this to ourselves. Communism lost. The Nazis lost. Fascism lost. Yet we alone did this to ourselves.

Weigel ended the night by talking about the lessons to be learned from rediscovering and reading what he called “the great books”. These are his Ten Lessons Learned from Classic Education:

1. The dignity of the human person as inalienable
2. The superiority of reason to raw emotionalism  
(Thinking trumps Emotion)
3. The sense of responsibility for the common good  
(A willingness to contribute and sacrifice for the common good)
4. The willingness to engage others with dignity and respect  
(Disagreement is not hate)

5. The critical importance of integrity, prudence and maturity in public life  
(Character counts)
6. The ability to distinguish between Wisdom and Whizbang (Twitter).  
(In other words, there is no way to find wisdom in 140 characters on Twitter or in brief Facebook status updates. Too many confuse the quick hit or even memes as some deep dark secret of life, or as wisdom.)
7. The recognition that democracy depends on a critical mass of virtue in the citizenry.  
(Weimar Republic: while the architects built grand facades and pillars making it appear as a great, classic society, it masked the corruption and dissatisfaction within that ultimately led to Hitler rising to power through a free election.)
8. The instinct for sniffing out demagoguery  
(Learning to recognize when the man of power is a demagogue in disguise)
9. An appreciation for the truly beautiful, not the transiently amusing.  
(We are amusing ourselves to death. Get yourselves, and most importantly your children, away from the screens.)
10. A sense of life as adventure.  
(Life has a goal and a direction. This goes against the zeitgeist of our post-modern line of thought that says “life is a burden.”)

Weigel concluded by emphasizing the need for Virtue and the things needed to become a free and virtuous society.

1. Democratic Society
2. Free market Economy
3. Vibrant Moral Culture

It takes a certain kind of people with certain virtues to make the machinery of political and economic society work.

So taking all of the above into consideration, what heals a wounded culture? Mr. Weigle’s response: An encounter with great thinkers and great minds of the past.

Throughout the evening he mentioned books such as *The Aenid*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, and the *Bible*. And writers/thinkers such as Aristotle, Augustine, Dostoyevsky and Aquinas.

Weigel ended his lecture with the following closing remarks: Honor the wisdom of the past and extend it into the future.

There was a brief Q&A afterwards. I raised my hand to ask what we as parents could do to help facilitate this education for our children given the fact that so many universities no longer appear to back their professors who teach a classical education. Here I was going to allude to the goings on at Providence College and Dr. Anthony Esolen ([you can get a good overview of it by reading this article](#) and the links within it), but a man behind me was called on first and he asked essentially the same question. Weigel’s response was to reiterate what he’d said earlier about removing the screens from our children’s lives and not only having the classics within our homes but to model good behavior for our children and read them. Read them together and discuss them. He talked about one family he knew that had a weekly family movie night, and while they would watch popular movies together they would also watch classics such as [A Man For All Seasons](#) and talk a bit about them with their kids as well.



Bishop Conley's closing remarks.

An interesting question was posed by a woman in the audience: If you could give one book to everyone in America what would it be? After humorously hinting towards a forthcoming book of his to be published early next year, Weigel once more referred to a book he'd talked about early in the lecture that he'd enjoyed that was written by James Traub [John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit](#). At over 600 pages however Mr. Weigel that might be a tough one to get everyone to read. After thinking it over audibly for a minute he said that although it wasn't a book, he'd give everyone a DVD set of the HBO miniseries [John Adams](#), based on the [book of the same name](#) by David McCullough.

Once the Q&A was complete, our Diocese of Lincoln Bishop James Conley closed the evening with a few remarks and a closing prayer.

I plan to do a quick follow up to this blog next week to discuss reading the classics. I determined that it would make this article too long. My apologies for the outline/bullet point nature of what I captured during the lecture. I learned to take notes that way to survive my history and political science lectures in college and I still use them to this day.

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This contribution is available at <http://jeffwalker.wordpress.com/2016/12/02/reviving-the-classic-liberal-arts-education-what-i-heard-at-george-weigels-lecture-in-lincoln/>  
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## Respond to Jesus [at Every Day Catholic, Deanna Bartalini]

Do you ever pray for God to say something to you? For a tiny tidbit to be revealed when you are praying or reading? I ask on a regular basis; I may be annoying though I choose instead to go with persistence is a positive trait. Today I heard something and was convicted. I read Matthew 21:23-27 and heard the chief priests and elders questioning Jesus about his authority. Jesus turns their question back to them asks about John the Baptist authority and they say nothing out of fear. Nothing, no response, not a word because they knew, deep in their souls, that a response would require something of them much greater than the simple answer. It would require believing in Jesus.

I sat and sat, asking God what I was supposed to learn from the behavior of those questioning Jesus. First, any response given to Jesus would have been fine; Jesus would turn it into a gift, probably of faith, to those who needed it and wanted it but were afraid to ask outright. Second, when Jesus asks for a response, I need to respond. If I get a clear word or direction and choose to not follow it, I am not acting



in faith, but in fear. My non-response is a very poor witness to faith. Instead, I am giving into fear. I am not responding to Jesus who wants only good for me. I have no quick or easy answer for myself or you if this applies, except to believe that faith is greater than fear. Let's hold on to him as we move forward in faith.

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## Advent IV with Fr. Robert Barron [at CatholicSoup]



Bishop Robert Barron celebrated the 4th week of Advent here for our Franciscan community. I thought it would be great to post his homily on entering into God's presence and direction for our own lives just as Joseph did. The message was to get outside of our own worlds and our own selves and simply enter into God's. "Learn how to Dream big" he says, because like St. Paul, we've all been sent. Here's the audio, enjoy!

Second, the band got some great positive feedback after playing in the mass. I also recorded the recessional song called "Come To Us" by Greg Walton, a third Order Franciscan who I meet in Los Angeles during the Religious Ed Congress. I entered his drawing to win a free CD that weekend. Well after the conference I checked my email and lo and behold, I had won that free CD! This song, was on that CD and I instantly feel in love with the words and the melody of it all. I had no idea I would be playing this exact song 8 months later for Bishop Robert Barron during Mass in Santa Ynez Valley California. Take a listen.

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This contribution is available at <http://catholicsoup.blogspot.com/2016/12/advent-iv-with-fr-robert-barron.html>  
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## When God Says "NO" [at Real Life Rosary]

On this day, 7 years ago, my wife and I loaded up my Chevy Malibu and headed East to CHOP, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia leaving 4 kids behind with my parents. It was a snowy day much like it is today here in Columbus and a very dangerous trip with plenty of wrecks and jack-knifed tractor trailers along the way.

We traveled to CHOP for a 2nd opinion by a world-renown eye specialist after our daughter Catherine was diagnosed with retinoblastoma, cancer of the retina. We prayed harder than ever before. We begged the intercession of St. Lucy, on this her feast day, after all what better way to glorify God than to have a cancer healing on the Feast of the Patron Saint of eye troubles.

God said, "no", and this is my reflection from shortly after that time....



Have you ever prayed for something only to have God say, "no"? Have you ever offered sacrifices, begun prayer chains, prayed novenas to every known saint in Heaven for an intention only to have God say, "no"? I have and I am willing to bet that you have too.

Most recently I prayed, as did many of you, that my daughter Catherine would be healed of the cancer in her right eye and that it would not need to be removed. We prayed hard everyday. We offered to God sacrifices and some of them heroic. We prayed novena after novena to Lucy, Peregrine and others. In the end, God said, "no".

Before that many of you prayed with us when Catherine was in the womb. You prayed with us during her first, second, and third surgery. You prayed for her healing. You prayed while she spent the first four months of her life in the hospital. You prayed for miracles and God said, "no".

So, how do we respond when our loving God says, "no"? How do we respond when unbelievers say, "where is your God?" I believe that our response depends on our relationship with Him. Like any human relationship, if the love between persons is shallow or superficial, it doesn't take much for the relationship to be destroyed or at least severely injured.

For the first few months of Catherine's life I viewed God as a miracle dispensing machine. I thought that if I asked hard enough, said enough prayers, offered enough sacrifices...He'd cough up a good '

ol

miracle.

After all

, I reasoned, with the state of faith today, couldn't He use the attention of a

bona fide

miracle to get more souls on His side? I argued, pleaded, threatened. In short, I threw a good, solid, spiritual temper tantrum. He said "no" and I ran off to my room and vowed to never talk to Him again.

I struggled with my faith after that. I struggled with who I was and who He was. Through it all, He was a patient, loving Father awaiting my return. When I realized that He was a loving Father, I also realized that I was behaving like a spoiled child and that our relationship was not one of love and trust.

In His goodness, He helped me realize this shortly before Catherine was diagnosed with

retinoblastoma

. My prayers this time were different. I prayed earnestly for a miracle but only if it was His will. I vowed to trust Him no matter the outcome.

In prayer one day, like a little child I asked Him, "why do you say "no" so often?" He had two answers - 1) You ask for snakes, 2) I say "yes" far more than I say "no". Snakes? The answer came to me in an instant. He was

referring

to the passage in Matthew when Jesus says, "

*..if he asks for a fish, will you give him a serpent*

?" God was giving me the opposite and true statement saying essentially, "you asked for a snake, I want to give you a fish."

I realized that God has other plans for me and for Catherine. A miracle cure of her eye was not part of that plan and that I need to trust that what he will do through her will be far greater. God only says "no" when we ask for snakes.

I thought long and hard about Him saying "yes" far more than He says "no" but just couldn't see it at the time but I accepted it. It wasn't until our family was returning from a long trip that I realized how often He does say "yes". As we pulled into the drive I was moved to give thanks for the safe trip we had and I asked everyone to say a prayer of

thanksgiving

with me. It was at that moment I heard Him whisper, "

*see, I said yes again*

." I thought of the prayers we had said 16 hours earlier asking for a safe passage and realized that yes indeed He does say "yes" far more than "no". The problem is that I am far less observant and thankful than I should be when He does say "yes".

As I write this I can think of hundreds of little prayers offered to God and the positive answers He gave. I am ashamed that I went on my merry way, like the other 9 lepers, not returning to thank Him each and every time. I pray for the grace to be more thankful. We all prayed for good results from Catherine's tests and that she wouldn't need Chemo, He said "yes". In fact, the doctor called on Christmas Eve day to let us know that when she removed the eye, she had gotten all of the cancer and none had made it into her brain. It was a big "yes".

God says "yes" far more often than He says "no" but I must retrain myself to see these little miracles and answers to prayer. He says "no" because He loves me and has a better plan for my life and the lives of those entrusted to me. God, give me the grace to be more thankful for both your "yes" and your "no".

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This contribution is available at <http://real-life-rosary.myshopify.com/blogs/news/when-god-says-no>  
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