

America

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Christmas 2015

LEO J. O'DONOVAN
BENJAMIN JOHN WILSON
THE EDITORS

Gift Books
For Christmas

OF MANY THINGS

Thanks be to God, this year has been quite a journey for America Media, an impressive period of growth and change during some of the most significant events of recent memory: a historic papal visit to the United States, the meeting of the Synod of Bishops on the family and the start of the U.S. presidential election.

I am very proud of the editors and staff who continue to bring you this smart, Catholic take on faith and culture, not just each week in print but every day online and every hour through social media.

This year we added several new editors and correspondents to our masthead; we hosted more than a dozen events; and we led two pilgrimages, one to the Holy Land and the other to Ignatius Spain. In 2015 we also launched new awards and programs for Catholic journalists, and we greatly enhanced our digital and video capabilities—all part of our efforts to realize our vision of America Media as a dynamic, multiplatform media ministry.

We could not have done all these things, however, without the support of people like you. Nor would we want to. America is more than a journal of opinion. We are a community, a resource for spiritual renewal and social analysis, guided by the Jesuit ideal of finding God in all things.

Everywhere I travel, I am reminded that America Media has the most loyal audience in publishing today. Many of you have supported us for decades, through fair and foul, changing editors, changing times and a changing church. Christmas is the time for thanks, so on behalf of all of us at America Media: Thank you. You are warmly remembered in our Masses and prayers each and every week.

In past years, **America's** readers

have been particularly generous contributors to our annual Christmas appeal. Without the support we receive each holiday season, we would not be able to sustain our commitment to excellence. A contribution to our Christmas appeal will go directly toward our most immediate and pressing financial needs and will enable us to continue to broaden our efforts to lead the conversation about faith and culture in the United States. A strong financial base is also essential in order for America Media to fulfill its vision for the future.

By now you should have received the direct appeal that was sent to our singularly generous group of America Associates and to our active and involved audience of readers and viewers. Regardless of the size of your contribution, we greatly appreciate whatever level of support you can manage. Please respond by sending your check to our offices at 106 West 56th St., New York, NY 10019, or use our donation page online at www.americamedia.org.

If you have already sent a donation, we thank you for your lovely Christmas present! We also thank you who have given **America** subscriptions as Christmas gifts. You would be surprised at the number of readers who became regular subscribers after receiving a gift subscription.

As I finish this column, night is falling and horns are honking as rush hour hits its peak in Manhattan. I am sure everyone heading home is quite happy that it is not snowing. Normal gridlock is bad enough without snow. But there may be another reason for their smiles: Christmas is coming. Hope and expectation are in the air. We have much to be thankful for and much to hope for. Merry Christmas!

MATT MALONE, S.J.

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Cover: A man uses a mobile device outside the Balian Ice Cream House, decorated for Christmas in Altadena, Calif., December 2014. Reuters/Mario Anzuoni

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James Martin, S.J., and Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill offer **Advent reflections**, and regional directors from **Jesuit Refugee Service** discuss their ministry to people displaced by conflict and persecution. Full digital highlights on page 23 and at americamagazine.org/webfeatures.



Abortion and Its Critics

While law enforcement agencies were steadfastly refusing to comment on the shooter's motives for the attacks at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, a single official, speaking off the record, revealed that the suspect had, in his rambling, said "no more baby parts." That was enough for many pro-choice activists to call for an investigation of "domestic terrorism" encouraged and abetted by the rhetoric of pro-life activists. Especially the connection has been drawn, as Katha Pollitt did in *The New York Times* (12/1), between "no more baby parts" and "the deceptively edited incendiary videos" from the Center for Medical Progress that revealed Planned Parenthood's involvement in procuring fetal tissue from abortions.

There is of course no justification for the shootings in Colorado Springs; they have been universally denounced, by pro-life leaders as well as by defenders of Planned Parenthood. But by depicting the very existence of the C.M.P. videos as an incitement to violence against abortion providers, pro-choice activists are trying to rule criticism of legal abortion out of the conversation altogether.

Blame-shifting rhetoric—whether from pro-lifers comparing anti-abortion violence to the violence of abortion itself or from pro-choice activists accusing opponents of providing cover for "domestic terrorism"—serves no one. Worse, it draws our attention away from responding to another incident of gun violence made possible by a deeply disturbed individual's easy access to high-powered weapons. The shooter may have used opposition to abortion as a pretext for his violence, but his violence should not be used as a pretext for rejecting pro-life arguments. And nothing should be used as a pretext for ignoring the need for substantive gun regulation.

Restoring the Right to Vote

More than 170,000 Kentucky residents with nonviolent felony convictions will regain their right to vote, thanks to an executive order issued by Gov. Steve Beshear on Nov. 24. In the past, former felons had to make individual pleas for voting rights. According to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University, one governor required an essay and three character references before he would even consider an application. The move by Governor Beshear, a Democrat who left office on Dec. 8, is not only a matter of fairness but also a sensible component of criminal justice reform. Along with lowering barriers to housing and employment, the restoration of voting rights sends a signal to ex-offenders that they are invited, and expected, to become law-abiding

members of their communities. Indeed, the Brennan Center cites lower recidivism rates among former prisoners who have registered to vote.

The Brennan Center also estimates that more than four million Americans are still prohibited from voting because of felony offenses. Florida and Iowa maintain lifetime bans; exceptions can be granted by the governor on what seems to be an arbitrary basis. In other states, ex-felons must wait a certain period of time before they can register to vote, or they must provide documentation from multiple state agencies that can be difficult to obtain.

Governor Beshear has moved in the right direction, but unless Kentucky amends its constitution, any future governor could put the lifetime voting ban back in place. (The new governor, Matt Bevin, has said he will not do so.) Despite some good news this year, fairness and consistency in voting laws will require constant vigilance.

Paris Climate Check

At press time there was great optimism that a multilateral agreement would emerge from the U.N.-sponsored summit on climate change in Paris this month. An agreement would entail new commitments from 180 nations to constrain or offset emissions that contribute to global warming. The emerging framework is ambitious, creative and historic; but it will still not be enough to prevent the earth from warming another two to three degrees Celsius by the end of the century. That may not sound like much of a shift, but it is enough, scientists say, to cause large areas of the earth to become uninhabitable because of stifling heat, drought or rising sea level. That outcome would send millions of people into flight in a vast, border-crushing migration that would dwarf today's refugee crisis.

Yet there are also many reasons to support hope that enough time and ingenuity remain to prevent or mitigate the worst. As new infrastructure is rolled out, fine-tuning the technology will optimize renewable energy outputs. And that tinkering may also lead to breakthroughs in entirely new areas of alternative-energy capacity-building.

Already nations like Germany have achieved breakout levels of renewable capacity. On individual days of bright sunshine and optimal winds, Germany has achieved renewable production of as much as 75 percent of the nation's daily power. Indeed, many of the obstacles ahead are political, not technological. Decommissioning K Street offices of fossil-fuel lobbyists may prove just as important as decommissioning coal plants in the upcoming struggle to secure the future by protecting creation.

Prince of Peace

One of the most moving moments of Pope Francis' recent trip to Eastern and Central Africa was also one of the most historic. To inaugurate the Jubilee of Mercy, the pope decided that he would open the main holy door not in Rome, as popes have always done, but in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. "Today Bangui becomes the spiritual capital of the world," he said. On that day the attention of the church and much of the world was focused not on a celebrated Roman basilica but on a lesser-known church in a poor, war-torn country. It exemplified the pope's desire for the church to go to the margins.

It was also a powerful reminder, particularly since Pope Francis made this gesture on the First Sunday of Advent, of when and where God chose to enter our world—not in a time of peace or in a region devoid of conflict but in an occupied country that was riven by internecine violence. As John Dominic Crossan points out in *The Historical Jesus*, Tacitus's well-known description of first-century Palestine, *Sub Tiberio quies* ("Under Tiberias all was quiet") was not meant to paint a portrait of a peaceful land. Rather, it referred to the Roman legions' practice of brutally and savagely subduing any opposition or rebellion from an oppressed Jewish people. And, as Professor Crossan points out in an aside, these reprisals were usually carried out by Roman legions based in Syria.

It is, sadly, too easy to draw parallels to contemporary situations. God's world is still plagued by violence, in regions too numerous to mention. Syria itself is again a place of warfare, and the resulting refugee crisis has become one of the worst in the modern era. And what should be a heart-rending tale of men, women and children seeking homes has drawn utterly heartless comments from some American political leaders. Christian legislators should remember that the Holy Family are depicted as refugees during their flight into Egypt (Mt 2:13-23). Like refugees today, they were fleeing violence, in their time from the tyrant Herod. As do so many of the war-battered today, the Holy Family lived in a time of danger and uncertainty.

Indeed, the entire Christmas story is replete with individuals facing uncertainty. To begin with, Mary's first words to the angel Gabriel are a question, "How can this be?" Her pregnancy prompted Joseph, who was probably burdened with doubts, to consider divorcing his betrothed, something he was within his rights to do, until a dream calmed him. And Mary's subsequent visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth

can be seen not only as a reflection of the desire to proclaim the great news of the birth of the Messiah but, more simply, as a young woman seeking counsel from an older woman in a world of uncertainty.

The when and where, however, is only part of the story of God entering our world. The how is important as well. "Not as a monarch, but a child," as the Christmas hymn has it. We may be so used to thinking about the familiar Christmas story that we forget that God could have entered the world in any way that God wished. But God chose to enter into the human family that lived in a small, backwater town under Roman rule. Moreover, God came to us in the most vulnerable and defenseless way possible—as a child utterly reliant on Mary and Joseph for care. God depended on us completely. Such vulnerability would also be an essential part of Jesus' life and ministry. And what is needed in the movement toward peace is a greater willingness to be vulnerable.

The opposite of this vulnerability is a fear that masks itself in defensiveness. Certainly some defense is necessary, but when taken to the extreme—nations perpetually arming for battle, terrorist groups waging campaigns of death, countries closing their borders to refugees—it shuts down opportunity for dialogue, reconciliation and peace. Herod was presented with the Messiah, but fear prevented him from listening. Similarly, fear prevents us from listening today to people most in need. If perfect love drives out fear, as St. Paul said, perfect fear drives out love.

The pope's visit to Africa shows the kind of vulnerability needed. He was willing to take risks. First, there were the risks of failure: one of his visits was to an ecumenical group in the C.A.R., which could have degenerated into another dull meeting. More important, he spoke to people at a mosque in an extremely dangerous area where Muslims had been isolated and under siege by Christian militias. He could have been killed. But in both cases, he was willing to risk being vulnerable and even defenseless.

The point is not that Pope Francis is the apotheosis of peace. Rather, he reminds us of the way Jesus asks us to work for peace: completely, totally, wholeheartedly. Only by being willing to take risks, to reach out, to drop our guard and enter the world with vulnerability will we be worthy of the call of the Prince of Peace.



REPLY ALL

A Better Debate

In “An Election Out of Focus,” by John Carr (11/30), the author decries the failure of the presidential candidates in either party to focus on creating opportunity for those out of work, underemployed and living in poverty. As such, this is just another in the ceaseless “a pox on both their houses” complaints in the media that feeds voter cynicism and antipathy to matters of public policy by engaging in journalistic equivocation.

The simple fact is that all the candidates have been addressing this issue. The Republican candidates target what they see as excessive taxation and regulation inhibiting the free market from investing more domestically and creating jobs. They propose tax cuts and slashing regulations on businesses that they see as stifling initiative. The Democratic candidates target what they see as a lack of investment in human capital, decaying infrastructure and growing inequality. They propose programs to make a college education less costly, expanding affordable healthcare, massive new investments in infrastructure to create jobs and raising taxes.

If Mr. Carr really wants to influence the debate for the better, he would do well to engage readers in a reasoned and fact-based discussion of the relative merits of these approaches. That would, indeed, be a rare and welcome counter to the “pox on both their houses” approach that typically passes as modern journalism. It would also be entirely consistent with the historic Jesuit mission of engaging in world affairs in pursuit of “the greater glory of God.”

CHRISTOPHER J. LOWERY
Online Comment

Words of Comfort

Re “Reversal of Fortune,” by Rabbi Daniel F. Polish (11/23): I am always

happy that I subscribe to *America*, both in print and online, but never more than the night when the terrible news about Paris was broadcast. I thank you, Rabbi Polish, from the bottom of my heart, for sending me this so very well timed article of faith and hope. I needed it so much.

MARY PEARLMAN
Online Comment

Taking Responsibility

“Spotlight” deserves the high praise of reviewer Maurice Timothy Reidy (“Big Dig,” 11/16). He thoughtfully reflects that the film “in its own way calls on all Catholics to take responsibility for the church.” A few Catholics tried hard to do just that, notably through the group Voice of the Faithful. Not only did bishops refuse offers to help but very few American Catholic priests, religious or laity moved from anguish to action. Change came mostly from the work of victims and their advocates, district attorneys and grand juries. With very few exceptions, Catholic journalists asked almost no hard questions; priests’ councils and religious orders were silent; and Catholics employed by the church and church-related institutions like universities did next to nothing.

The bishops, with the help of invited, confidential advisers, were allowed to shape the post-Spotlight story. To their credit they have adopted policies that will limit future abuse. They have also carefully limited the role of local and national advisory bodies. Mr. Reidy properly thinks Catholics should take responsibility for their church; but, as a wonderful Jesuit replied when asked about that: “But Dave, they won’t let you!” So far that seems to be the final word.

DAVID O'BRIEN
Worcester, Mass.

The writer is the emeritus Loyola Professor of Catholic Studies at The College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Mass.

The Least Bad Option

The key issue in “The Federal Mystique”

(11/9), by Helen Alvaré, is whether the “state” is moving toward absolute control of the lives of individuals. Democrats, the Obama administration and Hillary Clinton are all for “free contraception and early abortifacients” in universal health insurance. Yet “the Federal Mystique,” under Democrats and Republicans alike, also gave us several unjust and wasteful wars—Vietnam, Iraq I and Iraq II. For the next election I am thinking of setting up a stand outside the polling station where I can sell old-fashioned clothespins. You can put one on your nose prior to entering the voting booth.

JAMES SCHWARZWALDER
Online Comment

A Dangerous Game

Re “The Great Powers in Syria” (Current Comment, 11/2): I welcome Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict. It was way overdue. What and whom has the Pentagon been bombing for over a year? By many accounts, Putin’s month-long bombing of al-Nusra/ISIS has achieved significantly more. Why is that?

The war crime perpetrated against the Syrian people, by supplying “moderate” terrorists, has to end; otherwise, an accidental or manufactured false-flag operation could initiate what could amount to World War III. The Obama administration has not purged itself of warmongers and is now dealing with the consequences, though not so much as the Syrians.

CARLOS OROZCO
Online Comment

Canada’s Abortion Politics

Thanks to John Conley, S.J., for giving a larger perspective in “A New Subordinationism” (10/19). I live in Canada, and, sadly, what Father Conley describes has been lost for generations, in my opinion. Several years ago our Supreme Court threw out the existing federal law on abortion. The newly elected Liberal leader Justin Trudeau has banned people who fa-

vor pro-life positions from running for the Liberal Party. Perhaps this country provides a glimpse of America's future?

WILLIAM RYDBERG
Online Comment

Our Own Bible

I can quite agree with Corinna Guerrero ("Costly Scripture," 10/26), insofar as she recognizes the possibility of "trauma" affecting readers of the Bible. But I can by no means agree with her in her paradoxical commendation of reading the whole, undiluted version of the Bible. As one who has been teaching the Bible to Japanese students over the past 50 years, I tell them not to think of reading the book as a book from beginning to end. They will only be put off the Christian faith if they take Scripture at face value.

It is necessary to begin with the Gospels, and then to peruse the epistles of St. Paul. Then from the New Testament one may venture into the Old Testament. Thus we may each have our own anthologized version, just as Jesus himself, to judge from the Gospels, evidently had his own. When approaching Scripture, it is necessary to read between the lines, according to the warning of both Jesus himself and St. Paul: that the letter kills, whereas it is the spirit that gives life.

PETER MILWARD, S.J.
Tokyo, Japan

One Mass, Many Churches

Re "Church-Shopping," by Kaya Oakes (10/19): I'm a young adult myself, and I also find myself having some degree of difficulty finding a place at my parish. I agree that young adult groups feel forced and are somewhat uncomfortable and that the community I'm trying to build is not necessarily one of people who are just my age. Another thing I'd add to the author's article is the emphasis on liturgy. I grew up in a liturgically progressive parish, and for a while that was what I understood Mass to be. It wasn't until I moved from the West Coast to the East Coast that I was exposed to traditional music in tradition-

al spaces. I felt immediately more aware of the sacredness of where I was, of the sacraments, of the Eucharist.

One final note: we are blessed as Catholics by the number of parishes in different kinds of communities. Although I favor traditionalism because God speaks to me more clearly in that mode, I can certainly respect those who find it stuffy or boring. Maybe we don't all need to look for the same thing? We are the universal church, after all!

QUINN KRISTOF
Online Comment

Constructive Criticism

Re "At a Crossroads," by Bill Williams (10/19): As an American and an atheist I hold views of religion that I do not express out of a desire not to hurt the believers among my family, friends and neighbors. I see so much distrust, hate and even violence against Muslims in this country, and I do not wish to associate myself with such bigotry. While I see much truth in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's criticism of Islam, it also seems very dangerous to me—more likely to incite anti-Muslim bigots than to bring about change in the Islamic world, and to insult American Muslims who have nothing to do with the barbarism Ms. Hirsi Ali describes. And it occurs to me that we might focus on our own barbar-

ic practices, including the death penalty, torture, assassinations, gun violence and wars of aggression.

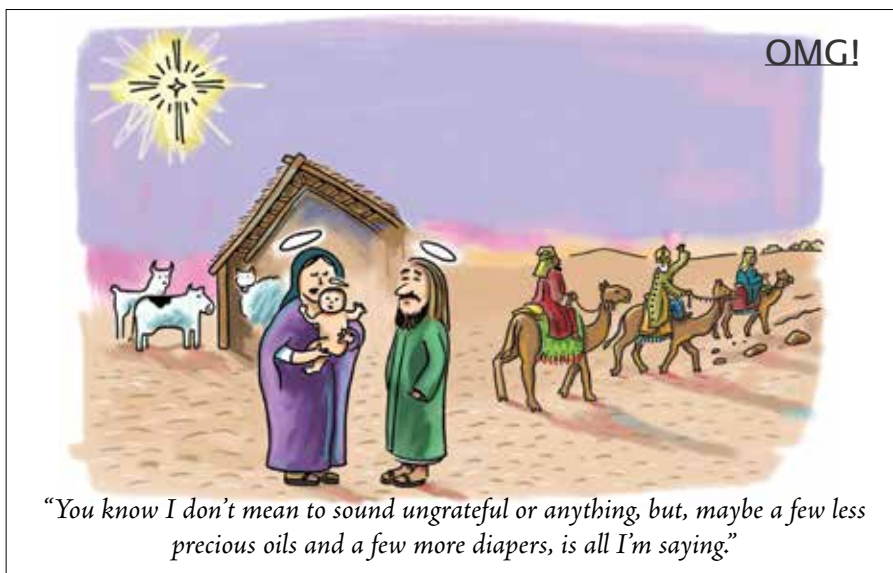
NEIL PURCELL
Online Comment

Medical Mismatch

"The Hour of Our Death," by John J. Paris, S.J. (10/5): The problem in health care for the gravely ill is that those who are knowledgeable about the treatments, the likelihood of success and probability of having horrendous side effects are those who are paid to provide treatment. Patients and families often have little idea of what the choices are in practical terms. The agony families experience over whether or not to withdraw treatment has been brought about by the advances in medicine. Fifty years ago, a family could give the emotionally satisfying directive, "We want everything possible done for our gravely ill grandmother," and the gravely ill grandmother either got well or died in a fairly short time.

"Do everything possible" now is likely to result in a months-long illness while connected to multiple machines, infused with drugs with a long list of side effects and a death in an intensive care unit. Our knowledge and emotions have yet to catch up with our technology.

LISA WEBER
Online Comment



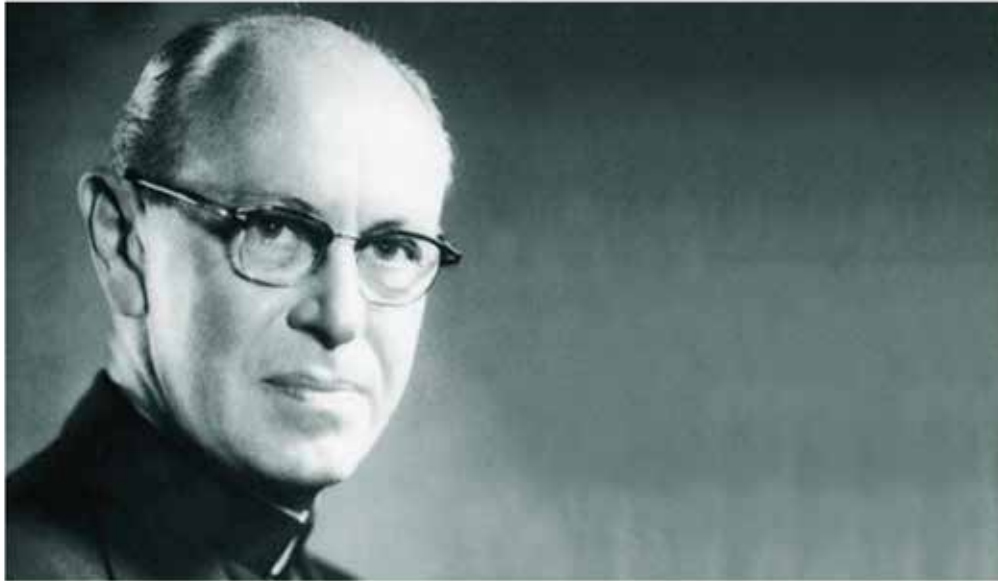
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John Courtney Murray, S.J., was a Jesuit priest and one-time associate editor of *America* whose writing helped the church navigate its way in a world of religious pluralism.

Please RSVP with Kerry Goleski at 212-515-0153 or events@americamedia.org by January 4, 2016.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

TERROR IN CALIFORNIA

Responding in the Aftermath Of Another Mass Shooting Incident



A FLICKER OF HOPE. A candlelight vigil in San Bernardino, Calif., on Dec. 3.

Arriving in the late morning on Dec. 2 at the San Bernardino diocesan pastoral center for his job in the diocese's Office of Worship, Chris Estrella knew something was very wrong.

"I could see a police blockade of Waterman Avenue, which is where the Inland Regional Center is located," said Estrella, a music and liturgy assistant. Once at his desk, Estrella turned on his computer and saw the reason for the blockade: The Inland Regional Center had become a murder scene, with 14 people killed and 17 more wounded.

"At that time, realistically, I felt safe," Estrella, 27, said on Dec. 3. "But I worried about my family—my parents, my siblings, including my little brother, who attends Our Lady of the Assumption School not that far away. Fortunately they were all safe."

But the pastoral center—and Catholic schools in the city—remained on lockdown for hours until "they began shuffling us out and told us, 'Go home, be with your families,'" said Estrella. Two armed suspects—later identified as Syed Farook, 28, and Tashfeen Malik, 27—were killed by police four hours later in a shootout about two miles from the social services center.

"I expect we will be remembering the victims" at a previously scheduled prayer service on Dec. 5, said Estrella, who added that more plans for prayer liturgies and Catholic community outreach were to be discussed at a meeting on Dec. 7 with

diocesan staff led by Bishop R. Gerald Barnes of San Bernardino.

"Like Bishop Barnes said, this is a time for prayer, a time to pray for peace," said Estrella. "I know there are many people all over who are praying for us here in such a terrible time, and I want to extend my thanks to all of them. We don't need any more violence."

Bishop Barnes attended a candlelight vigil on Dec. 3 at San Manuel Stadium in San Bernardino to remember those who died in the shooting. During the service, the names of the 14 people who were killed were read out. In a statement the previous day, Bishop Barnes urged people to pray for unity and healing after the mass shooting. "Our community of San Bernardino has faced great challenges through the years," he said. "Let us come together now in unity to bring light to the darkness of this day."

Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of Los Angeles said in a statement on Dec. 3 that it is "hard to understand this kind of violence and the hatred that motivates it. We ask how people can do such things, what is in their hearts? In these times, we need to trust in the providence of God and rely on his mercy.

"Our Christian faith tells us that we must overcome evil with good and respond to hatred with love. So this is our challenge in the days ahead," he added.

Some have linked the attack to terrorism—press reports on Dec. 4 indicate that Farook's wife, Malik, had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in a Facebook posting. Others point to the broader issues of the acceptance of violence and the proliferation of guns in American society. According to data released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation last week, more background checks for guns were run on

Black Friday this year than ever previously recorded—185,347. Since 1998, the F.B.I. has processed 220 million background checks for firearms.

According to the Mass Shooting Tracker (shootingtracker.com) at press time, on 209 out of the 336 days so far

this year, there has been one or more shootings somewhere in the United States—353 shootings in all—in which at least four people were killed or injured. Since January, almost every state has had at least one such mass shooting, and many have had far more.

YEAR OF MERCY

A ‘Revolution of Tenderness’

When Pope Francis planned the Year of Mercy and the opening of the Holy Door, he did not mean to give the starting signal for a frenzied wave of pilgrims to Rome. More than a call to sign up for an Eternal City package tour, the pope is inviting people to strike out on a yearlong spiritual journey to recognize a loving God who’s already knocking on their door.

He says he wants the Year of Mercy to usher in a “revolution of tenderness.”

Once people realize “I’m wretched, but God loves me the way I am,” then “I, too, have to love others the same way,” the pope said in an interview with *Credere*, the official magazine for the jubilee year, published just a few days before the year began on Dec. 8.

Whether in Rome or at home, Catholics will have a variety of ways to take part in the Year of Mercy. The Pontifical Council for the Promotion of New Evangelization, the office organizing events for the holy year, presented details about some of the events planned at the Vatican and the services available for pilgrims. Pope Francis will use a “very simple” ceremony to open the Holy Door in St. Peter’s Basilica on Dec. 8, said Archbishop Rino Fisichella, council president, who

spoke at a Vatican news conference on Dec. 4. After reciting verses from the Psalms, the pope will open the door and lead a procession of cardinals, bishops, priests, religious and laypeople through the door, arriving at the tomb of St. Peter.



In his interview, Pope Francis revealed that he would perform a symbolic and concrete work of mercy on one Friday of each month during the jubilee year. The first such gesture would take place on Friday, Dec. 18 when Francis will open the Door of Mercy at a hostel run by Caritas Rome near the city’s central train station where for the past 25 years “persons in grave need, who require our help” have been assisted.

Archbishop Fisichella said these

gestures “will be a testimony through which Pope Francis intends to highlight the major forms of need, marginalization and poverty that are present in society.” The jubilee is “a Holy Year to place mercy at the center,” Archbishop Fisichella said. In this context he said that the pope will commission some 800 “missionaries of mercy,” priests, coming from all parts of the world. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, he will give them “the mandate to be preachers of mercy and confessors full of mercy.”

Archbishop Fisichella provided more details:

Every evening until the year ends on Nov. 20, 2016, groups will take turns leading the recitation of the rosary in front of the statue of St. Peter in St. Peter’s Square.

In addition to the pope’s general audience on Wednesday, he will hold a special general audience one Saturday a month.

Special confessionals with wheelchair access will be available in St. Peter’s Basilica and other churches in Rome. Audio, video and “tactile book” resources will be available for people with a visual or hearing impairment.

Pilgrims who wish to walk through the Holy Door at St. Peter’s or take part in other

major jubilee events in Rome will have to register in order to receive the free tickets. This can be done online at www.im.va or in person at the official pilgrim information center at Via della Conciliazione 7, on the wide boulevard that leads to St. Peter’s.

Pope Francis has asked that doors of mercy be opened on Dec. 13 in every cathedral, major church or sanctuary in the world so that people can experience a pilgrimage near their own homes.

Climate Blueprint

Negotiators in Paris from 195 countries agreed on Dec. 5 on a blueprint deal aimed at reducing global carbon emissions and limiting global warming. Participants at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change were poised the following week for final discussion and approval of the agreement. The document addresses deforestation, food security, poverty and a host of other issues, including what developed countries can do to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 2050. The blueprint includes commitments to “provide developing countries with long-term, scaled-up, predictable, new and additional finance, technology and capability-building.” Tortuous U.N. negotiations dating back to the early 1990s have failed to forge unity between rich and poor nations, and the Paris talks are being described as the “last, best chance” to have an impact on global warming.

Debt Review

The U.S. Supreme Court announced on Dec. 4 that it will review a lower court decision blocking Puerto Rico from restructuring portions of its debt. Puerto Rico’s lawyers had urged the court to take immediate action in light of the overall magnitude of the commonwealth’s debts, around \$72 billion, which it says it cannot pay. In a letter to Congress on Dec. 1, Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami urged a legislative response to the problem. He said, “The people of Puerto Rico are suffering from painful poverty and hunger, persistent joblessness, and other social problems, as a result of the financial crisis gripping the Commonwealth’s economy.” He added, “They bear little responsibility for the situation yet suffer most of the consequences.” Over 45 percent

NEWS BRIEFS

Police from Italy and Kosovo announced on Dec. 1 that they had **detained four Kosovars** believed to be terrorist risks who had made threats on social media against Pope Francis. • Speaking at the U.N. climate conference in Paris on Dec. 4, Egypt’s **President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi** said, “All African nations are contributing less to the total harmful emissions and are the most affected by climate change.” • The world premiere of “Call Me Francesco,” a **movie based on the life of Pope Francis**, was held at the Vatican on Dec. 1 with many guests invited by the pope—“the poor, the homeless, refugees and the people most in need.” • On Nov. 30, Rome’s Colosseum was lit up in honor of Nebraska’s attempt to **abolish the death penalty** as part of Cities for Life Day, a worldwide event that supports the end of capital punishment, sponsored by the Rome-based lay Community of Sant’Egidio. • Pope Francis urged President Benigno S. Aquino III of the Philippines to “**always bring peace**” at the Vatican on Dec. 4—a significant exhortation, as the peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Movement has stalled.



President Aquino with Pope Francis in January

of the Puerto Rican population live in poverty. Archbishop Wenski urged Congress to advance the Puerto Rico Chapter 9 Uniformity Act. That bill would give the Puerto Rican government the same bankruptcy protections afforded to American cities.

Their Work Continues

In El Salvador, North Americans and Salvadorans gathered in the village of San Francisco Hacienda on Dec. 2 at the precise spot where four U.S. churchwomen were killed 35 years ago. “It is important for us to remember that her work for justice and peace lives on,” Terri Keogh told the crowd, referring to her sister Maura Clarke, a Maryknoll sister, during the memorial service held to commemorate the somber anniversary of the killings. On Dec.

2, 1980, Sister Clarke and Ita Ford, also a Maryknoll sister; Sister Dorothy Kazel, an Ursuline; and Jean Donovan, a lay missionary, were abducted, raped and murdered by members of the Salvadoran National Guard. This Dec. 2, in a memorial service held in San Salvador’s Parque Cuscatlan, a U.S. delegation called for the Salvadoran government to reopen the investigation into the women’s deaths to find the truth about who gave the orders for the killings. It is important to “ask the Salvadoran government and prosecutors to open this case, so that the masterminds of this crime do not walk free, with impunity,” said Claire White, who was present on behalf of her father, former Ambassador Robert White, who died in January.

From CNS, RNS and other sources.

DISPATCH | LONDON

Nuclear Deterrent or Millstone?

For decades, Britain has possessed an independent nuclear deterrent capability. While public attention to that nuclear capacity has waxed and waned, it has always been controversial. The issue has arisen again here in Britain, launched, as it were, by several factors: the election of Jeremy Corbyn, a lifelong supporter of nuclear disarmament, as leader of the U.K. Labour Party; a looming need to upgrade and replace the current nuclear force, evoking concern about cost; and, finally, the Scottish independence referendum, which last year brought renewed focus on the Royal Navy's submarines, packed with nuclear weapons, that are home-ported on Scotland's west coast. Most recently, a controversial commentary during a television program by a high-ranking U.K. military officer brought the debate back to life, as has, indirectly, the terrorist attack in Paris.

The United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent is its sea-borne Trident program: nuclear-powered Vanguard-class submarines based at the Clyde Naval Base very near Scotland's most heavily populated metropolitan area, around the city of Glasgow. Each vessel is armed with 16 missiles, each of which has eight thermonuclear warheads. At least one is on patrol at any given moment. The system was purchased from the United States, while the warheads were developed and produced in Britain. Trident represents the United Kingdom's only nuclear deterrent program, since the U.K. military decommissioned other delivery methods, like free-fall bombs, in 1998.

DAVID STEWART, S.J., is *America's London correspondent*.

Were Jeremy Corbyn to be elected prime minister, within minutes of "kissing the hand" of the monarch at Buckingham palace, he would be given the codes that could launch these weapons of mass destruction—the ability to "push the nuclear button." He has stated that he would refuse to do that. His reluctance raised, not for the first time, the question of the practical value of Britain's nuclear weapons

I.C.B.M. systems are useless against the danger that a group like ISIS represents.

program. Can deterrence work only if the person whose finger is on the button is prepared to push it? Corbyn, and like-minded others, believe that since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, military postures based on "mutually assured destruction" no longer apply, that nuclear deterrence, if it ever really worked, has become irrelevant.

Into this debate stepped the chief of the U.K. Defence Staff, General Sir Nicholas Houghton. In a television interview he claimed that, presuming Corbyn ever became prime minister, his refusal to launch would "seriously undermine" Britain's deterrent threat. Corbyn has demanded that the general be upbraided for this intervention into U.K. politics. Others argue that Britain's nuclear force did not rate as an independent deterrent anyway, because any decision to launch would come ultimately from Washington, not Whitehall.

The cost of the proposed replace-

ment keeps rising; the most recent estimate is £163 billion—about \$244 billion. Prime Minister David Cameron is determined to proceed with the modernization. The opposition focuses on the enormous price tag during a time of austerity and great need elsewhere. To many the proposed expenditure appears obscene. A further dimension to the debate is just emerging: Is such a huge cost justified even by purely strategic measures?

Many point out that France's nuclear capacity did not deter the awful attacks on Paris in late November. The practical threat has shifted, even changed altogether. Nuclear deterrence and intercontinental ballistic missile delivery systems are useless against the danger that a group like ISIS represents.

A second Scottish independence referendum looks likely as the Scottish National Party is set to sweep next May's Edinburgh Parliament elections. The S.N.P. utterly opposes Trident and its renewal. An independent Scotland would insist on the removal of missiles from Scottish soil and waters. Scottish politicians have wondered aloud if a U.K. government would ever countenance basing such weapons as close to London as they currently are to Glasgow. That position is striking a chord among many Scottish voters.

Roman Catholic teaching has always argued against the use of nuclear arms, while Pope Francis has recently renewed the church's call for their total abolition. In 1983 and again in 1993, the U.S. bishops boldly opposed nuclear weapons. The debate over nuclear weapons appears to be reviving, not only in Britain but around a changing and frightened globe. Are nuclear weapons a path to peace and security? Indeed, were they ever? Much might depend on our answer.

DAVID STEWART

For Christmas, James Martin offers us a novel gift idea.

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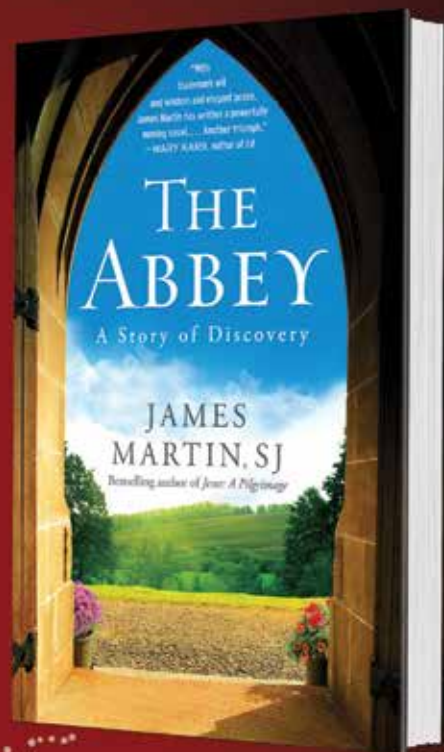
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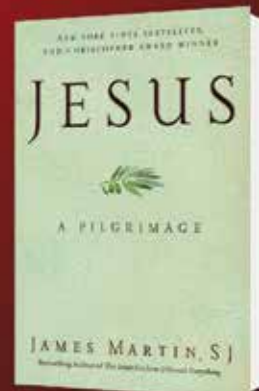
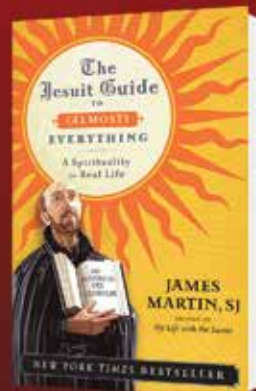
"Unputdownable."

—Brendan Walsh, *The Tablet*



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The Martyrs' Field

A Jesuit friend and I stood in a snow-covered field near Midland, Ontario, and we were silent. It was very cold. In the distance, through swirling snowflakes, we could see a tall wooden cross. We were at St. Ignace, the site of a settlement founded by French Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century. We were also standing where two of these Jesuits, Sts. Jean de Brébeuf and Gabriel Lalemant, were martyred. It was intensely moving to stand with a Jesuit friend on the spot where two other Jesuit friends met their death.

I was visiting in Toronto to speak at Regis College, the Jesuit theology school, and the next day my friend and I decided to drive to the Martyrs' Shrine, a place I had wanted to visit ever since entering the Jesuits. There are, in fact, two such shrines, built on or near the places where the North American Martyrs were killed during their ministry among the Huron-Wendat peoples in New France. In addition to the shrine in Ontario, there is another shrine in Auriesville, on the site of a village founded by the Jesuits in upstate New York. This shrine commemorates the martyrdoms of Sts. Isaac Jogues, Jean de la Lande and René Goupil. The three were killed by Mohawks, who at the time were enemies of the Hurons.

As Bernard Carroll, S.J., the director of the Canadian shrine, reminded us as we toured the grounds, it was not only Jesuits who were martyred; many Hurons who had converted to

Christianity were also killed. So the Martyrs' Shrine, which includes a reconstruction of the Jesuit village Sainte-Marie Among the Hurons, marks the legacy and martyrdoms of the native peoples as well. One of these, Joseph Chiwatenhwa, a catechist among his people, was the first non-European to make the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in North America.

Today there is a tendency to downplay, criticize or even condemn missionaries of old. The argument mainly goes like this: Missionaries came to impose their Eurocentric ways on an unsuspecting people who would have been happier without Christianity. As tools of the brutal colonialist oppressors, the legacy is one of domination. As a result, as Emma Anderson, a history professor, opines in her highly critical history, *The Death and Afterlife of the North American Martyrs*, Catholic martyrs in the United States have become mainly "symbols of Catholic doctrinal purity and intransigence."

Some of that reading is true: Sometimes missionaries supported, either wittingly or unwittingly, some of the more baneful practices of the colonial powers. But much of that reading is inaccurate. *The Jesuit Relations*, the collection of letters sent to France by the missionaries, paints a striking portrait of the lengths to which the Jesuits went to inculturate themselves. Learning the local languages was only the first hurdle. The Jesuits also needed to eat what to them was unpleasant

food, sleep tightly packed next to one another in longhouses and endure uncomplainingly the biting cold and, later, torture. (The letters also note that one must never flag when paddling in a canoe with the Hurons.)

From the *Relations* one also receives a vivid picture of the Jesuits' deep love for the people among whom they lived: "We see shining among them some rather noble moral virtues," wrote St.

Jean de Brébeuf. "You note, in the first place, a great love and union, which they are careful to cultivate.... Their hospitality to all sorts of strangers is remarkable; they present to them, in their feasts, the best of what they have prepared, and, as I said, I do not know if anything similar, in this regard, is to be found anywhere."

They suffered the severest privations to minister to people whom they both loved and admired. St. Isaac Jogues had his fingers either chewed or burned off, returned to France and then asked to return to New France. When people harshly criticize missionaries, I want to ask: Would you be willing to leave everything you know and travel across the world to live among people you've never met to share the good news of the Gospel with them?

As I stood in the cold, snowy field that day, I thought: Why were the North American Martyrs willing to face death? Not simply out of love for Christ, but out of love for the people to whom Christ had called them.

Today there is a tendency to downplay, criticize or even condemn missionaries of old.

JAMES MARTIN, S.J., is editor at large of *America* and author of the novel *The Abbey*.
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“Madonna of the Rose Garlands,” by Albrecht Durer, 1506.

Holy Framing

Experiencing the Incarnation through art

BY LEO J. O'DONOVAN

Albrecht Dürer’s “Madonna of the Rose Garlands,” a resplendent painting of Mary and the Christ Child surrounded by prominent personages of the early 16th century, is one of the great treasures of the National Gallery in Prague. A large altarpiece completed in 1506 as a commission for the German church of San Bartolomeo in Venice, it shows Mary seated in majesty with a golden crown held over her head by two cherubs and her son seated on her lap. She is placing a crown of roses on the head of the kneeling Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I to her left, while Jesus reaches friskily to his mother’s right to place an identical crown on the likewise kneeling Pope Julius II.

Other religious figures are gathered on the pope’s side, including Antonio Soriano, the

LEO J. O'DONOVAN, S.J., is president emeritus of Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

Patriarch of Venice, Burkhard von Speyer, the superior of San Bartolomeo, and St. Dominic, crowning a bishop with roses. The landscape behind Dominic is brought forward toward the viewer. On the emperor's side, it reaches back to a luminous Alpine view, with Dürer portraying himself prominently in the foreground not far from the architect Hieronymus of Augsburg, who wears a pale blue robe. Centered at the bottom of the picture is a musical angel, a clear tribute to Giovanni Bellini, the master of his time, whose "San Zaccaria Altarpiece" of 1505 featured just such an angel in just such a place in the composition.

Although the painting has been damaged by numerous restorations, "in one propitious moment," as the great art historian Erwin Panofsky wrote, Dürer's gleaming altarpiece still succeeds "in synthesizing the force and accuracy of his design with the rich glow of Venetian color." To the solemn, serene monumentality of Bellini it adds a cast of natural, individualized figures and a dramatic sense of movement. And we viewers are invited to be part of the ceremony, which is more properly called "The Feast of the Rosary"—the crowns of roses being symbols of the rosary, for which a special brotherhood had been established in Venice by Leonard Vilt. Here we are at the moment where the Quattrocento passes to the Cinquecento, not simply chronologically but stylistically, and the High Renaissance is at hand. No wonder the doge of Venice, the patriarch, any number of nobles and very likely Bellini as well thronged to Dürer's studio on hearing the great work was finished.

Needless to say, this is not a Christmas or Nativity painting as such. It stands in the lineage of paintings of Mary and her infant son accompanied by saints and presented in handsome architectural spaces that goes back at least to Fra Angelico's "Annalena Altarpiece" (c. 1435), becomes enchantingly vivid in Flemish paintings like Hans Memling's "Virgin and Child With Saints Catherine of Alexandra and Barbara" (1479) and develops into ever more natural groupings of mother, son and relaxed saint-companions known as *sacra conversazione*. Related to these paintings is the special iconographical theme of the Rosenkranzbild, or rosary picture, which was especially popular in Germany.

For a conventional nativity scene we should turn to Dürer's earlier "Paumgartner Altar" (c. 1500), a triptych whose central panel charmingly shows the Christ Child in a crib of cherubs between Joseph and Mary. But what of the little donor figures in the painting, crowded to the left and right of the Holy Family? And the large left panel depicting St. George and the similarly high right panel depicting St. Eustace? Well, St. George is a portrait of Stephan Paumgartner and Eustace a portrait of his brother Lukas, while the smaller folk are other members of the Paumgartner family, who commissioned the altarpiece. Of course they had to be there.

"Paumgartner Altar," by Albrecht Durer, ca. 1500.



Being With Him

Most of us are used to the convention of (smaller) donor portraits appearing in Renaissance painting. They are devotional tributes, of course. But what else do they tell us about the actual, historical birth of Jesus and the contemporaries of the artists who depicted the birth? It is the birth the artists paint, not the incarnation as such. That took place through the whole time of Jesus' life as he became fully human, a process completed ("It is finished") only with his death on the cross. But what is the fuller meaning of Angelico's early saints with Francis of Assisi in the "Annalena Altarpiece," Catherine and Barbara in the Memling, Stephan and Lukas Paumgartner towering (as they do) over Mary, Joseph and the infant, the pope and the emperor seeking to kneel before and be crowned by the mother and the child? It cannot be the denial or collapse of the time between Jesus and the saints, canonized or not, who venerate him. Incarnation, God's pitching his tent with us through the Word made flesh, is a radicalization of time's value, not its denigration.

What then? This: the figures shown as contemporary

with Christ are to be seen as what they most deeply desire to be—namely, with him. All else is possible because of this: being with him. And Christ, precisely, has made that possible by opening time to eternity through his transfiguring death and resurrection. He is present at every time and in every age that he draws forward to his presence in the communion of saints. There dwells, as once in Bethlehem, an eternal now in every moment of our fraught, full flow of time. Dürer, portraying himself for the first time in a monumental altarpiece in “The Feast of the Rosary,” could be with Christ then because he is with Christ now. (Who would want heaven without him?)

What is this eternity that dwells in our every now? It is not an endless time to come after our passing time. It is, rather, what God is—absolute reality and life without change. We have no positive conception of it, but instead a negative concept. As we say with St. Thomas Aquinas, we know that God is but not what God is, so we know that eternity is but not what eternity is. The classic definition of Boethius—eternity is the perfect possession of endless life held wholly all at once—directs our thought in the right direction, but without defining the goal. And when we speak of an afterlife, what we properly mean is eternal life, more promising by far if also more mysterious.

We may thus say, with the prologue of John’s Gospel: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” or: the eternal Word became the flesh of time, opening our time and his (the same) to his eternity promised as ours. For early Christian writers, as Hugo Rahner, S.J., has shown, there was a strong sense that as the Word was born eternally in the bosom of the Father and became flesh in the womb of Mary, so too he was born from the heart of the church and the faithful. And it became common for the three Masses of Christmas—of the night, of the dawn and of the day—to be seen as symbolizing a threefold birth of Christ: eternally in the Father, from the womb of the Virgin Mary and mystically in the souls of the faithful.

The Ground of the Soul

The great Dominican philosopher-theologian and mystic, Meister Eckhart, went even further, speaking of the eternal birth of the Word in the ground of the soul. Eckhart understood the ground of the soul as the deepest and purest interiority of the human person. There alone, if we are totally empty of being an assertive self, God can enter into true personal union with us. Eckhart’s teaching had significant precedents in earlier Christian mysticism; but in a cycle of four Christmas sermons delivered in the early years of the 14th century (c. 1303-5), he elaborates his theme of this “silent middle,” into which God’s being enters as the origin of the Son born in eternity and also in the ground and essence of the soul. He insists, indeed, that these two modes of di-


vine birth should not be divided. “The eternal birth occurs in the soul precisely as it does in eternity, no more and no less, for it is one birth, and this birth occurs in the essence and ground of the soul.”

It would be hard to state the incarnational union of time and eternity more forcefully than this. Yet it is the inner meaning of great paintings like those Rembrandt has given us of the Christ Child with his parents or Velázquez of the Wise Men worshiping him. In both, God is with us as incarnate Word, delightful in the simplest human appearance and yet drawing us through time toward the radiant, imperishable presence of eternity—now as Rembrandt shows Mary playing with her child in his cradle, now as Velázquez shows her holding him on her lap for the Magi’s wonder.

It would be centuries before art of such power found means again to address the true mystery of the eternal in time. Sentimental conventions and academic formulas had to be set aside. Fresh eyes, and not always those of faith, were needed to imagine what was at once too simple and too profound for a too comfortable art. But Paul Gauguin, for example, in his Tahitian version of the annunciation, took the now shop-worn story, merged it with the theme of the madonna and child, added two surprised observers—and gave us “La Orana Maria” (1891). In the wondrous colors of the islands, Mary is now a sturdy Tahitian girl whose son, perhaps 2 years old, sits on her shoulder, his head nestled against hers. An angel is hidden nearby in a flowering bush. And two women wonder what this all means. We see again.

Or the great African-American painter Romare Bearden ponders how the eternal now of the Christ child and his mother can be imagined, takes the treasured Russian icon of the “Virgin of Vladimir” (early 12th century) and reinterprets it as a black madonna and child. Still more inventively, in his “Adoration of the Magi,” a painting from his 1945 “Passion of Christ” series, Bearden shows us Mary and the child in the middle of the picture, with the Magi on either side. He uses a richly hued, prismatic cubism, more gripping than any easy “realism,” to suggest the mystery of all natural wisdom bowing to eternal wisdom. We are held in the now that, even more than entering into time, draws all time toward it.

Now—at Christmas, as always, Christ is present. But at Christmas, celebrating his birth, amid all the family joy and gift-giving, troubled also by the sorrows of our day, as Mary and Joseph undoubtedly were by theirs, we have a date for what ultimately transcends all dates, God’s Word among us to draw us through his Spirit to himself. Let us praise the artists who have helped, and pray God will in the future help us again, to imagine this mystery of all mysteries.

The antiphon for the Magnificat in Evening Prayer on Christmas Day reads, *Hodie Christus natus est*: “Today Christ is born.” Today—forever. 

Articles of Faith

Reflections on the great commentator, Mary McGrory

BY JOHN NORRIS

Mary McGrory was a giant of modern journalism. Across five decades, her incisive commentary illuminated the American political scene, first on the pages of *The Washington Star* and later *The Washington Post*. Her syndicated columns ran in more than 150 papers across the country. The first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for commentary, she was also featured prominently on President Richard Nixon's infamous "enemies list."

Although Ms. McGrory's faith was largely absent from her columns (she objected to proselytizing), it shaped her far more than most of her readers, and even many of her friends, appreciated. Her faith was her moral center. "Mary was so wonderfully caustic and funny about life that it probably didn't occur to most of us that she was deeply religious," observed her fellow columnist Anthony Lewis. "It was an anomaly among that group of people."

The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas à Kempis, almost always graced Ms. McGrory's nightstand. And she certainly took one of its central teachings, "fawn not upon the great," to heart as she mercilessly lambasted the foibles and foolishness of presidents, senators and Supreme Court justices. (Bobby Kennedy once remarked with some rue, "Mary is so gentle, until she gets behind a typewriter.")

"She was a devout Catholic," said her friend Elizabeth Shannon, "Every night before she went to bed she was on her knees beside her bed saying her prayers. She was at Mass every Sunday. She really practiced her religion, and it was a huge part of her life.... She would never even mention it in public, but I would realize when we traveled together how private it was and how important it was to her."

Ms. McGrory grew up in Depression-era Boston, at a time when the city's Irish, Italian, Jewish, German and other communities mixed either uneasily or not at all. Bigotry ran hot. Protestants disparaged Catholics as unwashed pawns of the pope. Irish-Catholic priests threatened their flocks with excommunication for even participating in a Protestant wedding. The noted Boston historian Thomas O'Connor observed that when you lived in a Boston neighborhood, "you lived in a very, very closeted area...for good or for bad

JOHN NORRIS is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C., and the author of the recently published book *Mary McGrory: The First Queen of Journalism*.




CAUSTIC COMMENTATOR. Mary McGrory at the Watergate hearings

that was the way we were inculcated." Your parish was often your identity, and Ms. McGrory herself observed that only the more tolerant in her neighborhood "thought we would meet our Protestant neighbors in heaven."

'She Who Must Be Obeyed'

Ms. McGrory's view of religion was far more welcoming than that of many of her peers. She felt that the entire point of religion was to assist the oppressed and less fortunate—one area in which she thought the church often fell criminally short. Ms. McGrory saw social justice as the cornerstone of responsible Catholicism and believed in a God of love and compassion. She blended very traditional Catholicism with distinct strains of what came to be known as liberation theology.

Ms. McGrory contributed regularly as a columnist for this magazine from the late 1950s to the early 1970s and penned a number of thoughtful pieces for *Commonweal* during the 1950s. It was clear that she took matters of theology very seriously. She frowned upon the increasingly harsh anti-Communist excesses of the early 1950s during



Ms. McGrory thought Blessed Paul VI's unwillingness to support the use of birth control needlessly pushed millions away from the church.

the Red Scare, and she thought the church too willing to turn a blind eye to the excesses of McCarthyism. (It was her coverage of the Army-McCarthy hearings in 1954 that thrust her into the national spotlight.) Ms. McGrory was an ardent supporter of St. John XXIII's reforms during the 1960s, and she always spoke of him in the highest terms: "John was charisma itself. He made it clear that it is not a sin to be charming even if you are pope. He made his church a place of welcome and compassion for all God's children."


Later, Ms. McGrory thought Blessed Paul VI's unwillingness to support the use of birth control needlessly pushed millions away from the church and quoted an Italian woman to make her case: "To be a Catholic doesn't mean to be an imbecile." But Ms. McGrory was in strong agreement with the church on abortion, and it was her own belief

that abortion extinguished a life: "You can phrase it a lot of different ways, but that's what I think it comes down to." Ms. McGrory was a member of the increasingly endangered minority of adamantly pro-life Democrats, and she objected to the view within Democratic ranks "that every single intelligent person is pro-abortion."

Ms. McGrory took her commitment to good works most seriously. For more than 50 years she volunteered at St. Ann's, a local orphanage in Washington. Almost every single week when she was not on the campaign trail, she went in to read with the children and help them with homework. Since many of the children struggled with the rolling *r*'s of her last name, they took to calling her "Mary Gloria." She loved the mispronunciation; it sounded exotic and Italian. Ms. McGrory was a fixture at St. Ann's. She helped pay for books and Christmas presents out of her own pocket and was always a soft touch when the orphanage was up against a budget shortfall.

It was Ms. McGrory's insistence on enforced volunteerism at St. Ann's that led the columnist Maureen Dowd to describe her as "she who must be obeyed." Few of her fellow reporters dared say no when it came to helping with the field trips and picnics for the children from St. Ann's. Every "volunteer" was given a clear role—from playing Santa at the Christmas party, as did Mark Shields and Tim Russert at different points, or making peanut-butter-and-mayonnaise sandwiches. Volunteers who missed the "junior picnics" with the children were not allowed to attend the "senior picnics"—the more boisterous dinners that followed. Ms. McGrory often donated more than a quarter of her annual salary to a range of charitable causes.

Later in life (she died in 2004 at the age of 85), Ms. McGrory's giving helped establish the Mary Gloria Room at St. Ann's to assist the children with additional help and tutoring in reading. It officially opened on Valentine's Day 2000, and it was as well-equipped as any private school. During brief remarks at the ribbon cutting, Ms. McGrory confessed that she routinely lied when filling out her taxes, since the I.R.S. requirements were that she must have received "nothing of value" in return for her donations for them to be deductible. "That's not true. I have received great treasures," Mary shared. "Some of them have told me about the violence they have witnessed, and even endured: knifings, shootings, and other things that shouldn't have happened. They bear their burdens with great valor. They are responsive and funny. If they just can weather the first grade, and understand that we believe in them and their potential, they'll do just fine."

Ms. McGrory wrote every other day about great events, politics and the grand national stage, but she never lost sight of those whose names would never be in print and simply needed a helping hand. 



the JOSEPH A. O'HARE, S.J.,

Post-Graduate Writing Fellowship



OVERVIEW

The mission of the Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J., Post-Graduate Writing Fellowship is to support the next generation of writers for the Catholic media and other forms of professional journalism. The fellowship offers three recent graduates of Jesuit colleges or universities in the U.S. or Canada the opportunity to develop their literary skills and professional relationships while living and working in the capital of global communications, New York City. O'Hare Fellows spend one full year working at the offices of America, where they will generate content for America's multiple platforms: print, web, digital, social media and events.

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TIMELINE

Jan. 30, 2016: Application deadline.

Feb. 2016: Review of applications and notification of first round decisions.

March 2016: Online interviews with finalists; fellows announced.

Aug. 2016: Fellowship commences.

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An Unnoticed God

It is no small thing to see Jesus in those we might be tempted to look past.

BY BENJAMIN JOHN WILSON

Long before Jesus was condemned by Pontius Pilate and rejected by the authorities, denied by Peter and betrayed by Judas, misunderstood by his followers and chased away by his townspeople, he came onto the scene virtually unnoticed. “There was no room for them in the inn,” Luke reports with understated reserve. Is it not curious that Luke seemingly finds nothing outlandish about the long-awaited messiah’s arrival occasioning practically no response except for one small band of shepherds who were tipped off by a rather singular display of “the glory of the Lord”?

No, Luke is an astute enough chronicler of both the human and the divine to know that God tends to avoid the spotlight and that we are in the habit of alternately overlooking and not looking far enough for God. God, the creator of the universe, became a helpless baby so insignificant and ordinary that not even a single decent room in the inn could be found for him. During the Christmas season, we as a church collectively recall and celebrate that God is often closer and smaller than we think.

God in My Freezer

Recently, my wife was pregnant with our second child and was due at the same time that we planned to move. Our “new” old house required considerable work before it was ready to be moved into with a toddler and a soon-to-be newborn. Working on the house took us to the brink of exhaustion—and all of this in the lead-up to welcoming home a tiny, sleepless bundle of joy. Many friends came to our aid. One friend brought us a dozen or so pints of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream and stashed them in our freezer. Each night, bleary-eyed from long hours of working on the house, my wife and I would gather around ice cream and rehash the day’s progress and size up the next day’s projects.

BENJAMIN JOHN WILSON, a graduate of *The College of the Holy Cross* in Worcester, Mass., works at the University of Notre Dame’s Center for Social Concerns as an assistant director of the Summer Service Learning Program, an eight-week summer domestic service immersion program within a three-credit theology course.



The cache of ice cream steadily diminished. Yet one evening we opened the freezer and found an as-of-yet undiscovered pint of Ben and Jerry’s. God was in that ice cream. I am certain of it. It was not that the last pint miraculously appeared. Its presence—tucked behind a bag of frozen vegetables—was entirely explicable. Our friend obviously had put it there. But that last pint of ice cream revealed something of the humble means God so characteristically assumes to communicate a bottomless love. Like a secret admirer eager to communicate affection, God employs ingenious creativity in riddling our lives with seemingly unsigned love notes. God seems content to be tucked away in small places not because God does not want to be found but because God is humble enough to wait for us to go looking. My friend with the ice cream showed me what God desperately wanted me

ART: ANNI KISSANE ENGELHART

to know in those anxious days: My family is loved. If I had been waiting for a thunderbolt from heaven to tell me that, I would have missed the message. God used a far subtler, sweeter means of communication that risked being overlooked altogether as something as ordinary as, well, some extraordinarily delicious ice cream.

St. Ignatius Loyola has a memorable phrase for thinking about God's presence all around us. Ignatius said, "God labors and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth." His point was that one of the most common ways that God loves us is through other people. We are accustomed to interpreting other people's words and actions toward us as indicating how they themselves feel about us. Ignatius invites us to see how our daily experiences of receiving love also reveal God's own deep care for us.

But life is not all about finding hidden pints of ice cream. Another way that God is also "smaller" than we sometimes think is God's presence in the most marginalized of our brothers and sisters, including those who are hungry, homeless or in prison. In Chapter 25 of the Gospel according to Matthew, we learn that whatever we do—or do not do—to "the least" of those around us, we do—or do not do—to Jesus himself. Matthew suggests that neither those who served others nor those who ignored others realized that it was Jesus they were encountering. Our eyes are not habituated to seeing God in those around us. It takes practice to

perceive God in other people, particularly in those the world pushes to the margins. And the conclusion of Matthew 25 points out that it is no small thing to find God in those we might be tempted to look past: our salvation depends on it.

God Outstretched on the Cross

Part of the reason that no room could be found in the inn for Mary, Joseph and Jesus is that God so often slips by unnoticed in the seemingly small and ordinary. But even if the most lavish hospitality had been shown to the infant Jesus and his fatigued parents that night, no accommodations—not even the universe itself—could be roomy enough to enclose the God who had come to earth. God came to dwell among us. We, however, can never domesticate God. We are always right to name an experience as potentially revelatory of God's presence. And at the same time, God remains beyond our limited human experience and understanding. God was both "in" that surprising last pint of ice cream and is infinitely more than it.

Karl Rahner, a German Jesuit theologian, had a delightful way of talking about this "more-ness" of God. To Father Rahner, God was not an inaccessible, rarified mystery entirely beyond reach. Instead, Father Rahner perceived an unbounded roominess in God such that God is "infinitely knowable." We can know more and more about God and there is always more and more to know. The multiplicity

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of Gospel portraits of Jesus and the diversity of images of God throughout Scripture bear witness to this “more-ness” of God. We would do well to frequently revisit lesser-known passages in order to curb the tendency to shrink our image of God to a size and shape that often bears a striking resemblance to our own selves.

We can savor finding God in small moments when we feel surprisingly loved, or in epiphany experiences when we perceive God on the margins where Jesus promised we would find him. Can we also find God in the overwhelming suffering and hardship that exists in our world and in our own lives? God’s “bigness” comes into question when it can seem like he is absent from those places where his presence is most needed.

For more than half a century, Dorothy Day worked, wrote and spoke tirelessly in response to the crushing needs of those living in poverty both near and far. Her own life was frequently marked by feelings of bleakness and depression. Even after becoming a national celebrity and being called upon by Blessed Mother Teresa and Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O., Dorothy Day continued to struggle with feeling unwanted, unloved and unloving. Again and again, she turned to the Eucharist and communal meals to find God’s presence. She famously concludes her autobiography with the lines: “We know Him in the breaking of the bread, and we know each other in the breaking of the bread, and we are

not alone anymore.”

Dorothy Day found solace in the Eucharist, which continues to make present the God who, outstretched on the cross, went to the very depths of all that is human out of love for us. The God who was content to arrive almost unnoticed in Bethlehem was lifted up for all to see at Golgotha. She also took comfort in the rhythm of ordinary meals among the poor at the Catholic Worker houses of hospitality because she was familiar with God’s penchant for dealing in the commonplace, the overlooked and the downtrodden. Understandably, we may ask of God, “Where are you when there are so many people suffering?” Might God not also be asking the same question of us? As St. Teresa of Avila says, “Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours.”

That ragged assortment of shepherds who “went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger” could well be the patron saints of the Christmas season. They were humble enough to be overcome with awe at the glory of the Lord that shone around them. And with eyes still burning from the sight of it, they could equally make out God’s tiny, bundled figure in the shadows of the manger. Holy shepherds, pray for us this Christmas that we too might fall in worship surrounded by God’s immeasurable heavenly light and run in haste to find God’s tiniest trace here on earth. ▲

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RADIO

Dr. Katrine Camilleri, the Director of Jesuit Refugee Service Malta, and Sister Denise Coghlan, the Director of J.R.S. Cambodia, discuss their work with refugees around the globe.



VIDEO

James Martin, S.J., shares a short reflection on a key Advent theme: desire.

WHAT YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT:

“Why would any terrorist subject himself to the intense scrutiny of the U.S. government? The fear is a win for the terrorists.”
 – GABRIEL MARCELLA, “AMERICA’S COWARDLY REFUGEE POLITICS”

FROM OUR BLOGS

Chicago’s Year of Living Violently
Judith Valente

Poll-pourri: On Trust in Government, Free Speech and the American Family, Robert D. Sullivan

An Uber for Priests?
Jim McDermott, S.J.

WHAT YOU’RE READING

‘Allahu Akbar’ Was Never a Call to Violence and Destruction
Thomas Rosica, C.S.B.

Learning to Grieve and Forgive My Parents’ Divorce
Zac Davis

Archbishop Kurtz: U.S. Church Still Ready to Receive Refugees
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Social Justice for All: Sean Salai, S.J. interviews Bishop Thomas Gumbleton

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Francis as Bridge-Builder

As America's Vatican correspondent, I have had the privilege to accompany Pope Francis during the past year as he visited 11 countries on four continents. I have also observed close-up his major initiatives in the Vatican, including the creation of new cardinals, the publication of the encyclical "Laudato Si," the closing of the meetings of the Synod of Bishops on the family and the opening of the Jubilee of Mercy in Rome, after his visit to Bangui in the Central African Republic.

In this, my last column of the year, I wish to share some reflections on the attractive, humble witness that Pope Francis has given to the Gospel in these events.

I begin with the foreign visits. On two of them, he showed extraordinary courage and determination, rooted in deep faith and trust in God. First in the Philippines on Jan. 17, when, despite a growing tropical storm, he flew to Tacloban, the island hit by Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013, to console and give hope to its inhabitants. There, amid high winds and rain, Francis drove among them and celebrated Mass wearing a yellow poncho. But he had to cut his visit short because of rising gale-force winds.

That same courage, determination and faith stood out like a bright star in the night sky when Francis, dismissing strong opposition and dire warnings, flew into Bangui on Nov. 29 to show his closeness to the beleaguered citizens of the Central African Republic's capital, crushed by conflict and pover-

ty. They welcomed him as a liberator everywhere he went and hailed him as a bringer of peace and hope.

As pope, Francis has given priority attention to what he calls the peripheries: situations of conflict, injustice, suffering and exclusion. He did this on Nov. 29, when, breaking centuries-old tradition, he opened the Jubilee of Mercy in Bangui's cathedral, not in Rome, and told the people: "Today Bangui becomes the spiritual capital of the world. The Holy Year of Mercy arrives in advance in this land that has suffered for several years from war, hatred, incomprehension, and the lack of peace" and "in this suffering land there are all the countries in the world that are suffering the cross of war. We all ask for peace, mercy, reconciliation, pardon and love for Bangui, for the Central African Republic and for all the countries suffering from war."

He prioritized the peripheries too by visiting Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay and Sarajevo. And in his keynote talk to the World Meeting of Popular Movements at Santa Cruz, Bolivia, he spoke strongly for the rights of countless millions of people who live amid poverty, misery and other forms of injustice.

Visiting Cuba and the United States, he sought to encourage normalization of relations between them, which he had helped broker.

Francis's vision is global and inclusive; he is concerned about all the world's inhabitants, not only about Catholics. This was reflected in his decision to focus on two subjects that touch everybody: ecology and the family. He cap-

tured the world's attention with both his encyclical, subtitled "On the Care of Our Common Home," and the synod on the family.

His authentic leadership, original lifestyle, vision and peace efforts earned him an unforgettable reception when he addressed the U.S. Congress. And the following day, more than 150 world leaders were present when he addressed the U.N. General Assembly.

Throughout the year, Francis energized Catholics worldwide by reminding them that one proclaims the Gospel by the witness of a life that reflects the central elements of Jesus' message: love, mercy, encounter, inclusion and the preferential option for the poor.

The pope believes firmly in the culture of encounter. He visited, for example, a Buddhist temple in Colombo, a Lutheran church in Rome and the evangelical churches' theology faculty in Bangui. Most significant of all, he went to the central mosque in Bangui, in the heart of the city's Muslim enclave, which has been a flashpoint for violence in recent years, where Christians and Muslims killed one another. Francis prayed in the mosque, affirmed that "Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters" and then, riding with an imam on the popemobile, visited Muslims from a refugee camp in a nearby school sports field. It was the sort of healing action that helps create the climate for peace.

These are some of the memorable ways with which Francis built bridges in 2015. Expect many more in 2016.

GERALD O'CONNELL

GERARD O'CONNELL is America's Rome correspondent. America's Vatican coverage is sponsored in part by the Jesuit communities of the United States. Twitter: @gerryrome.

Fine Pruning

Cutting back for a more contemplative life.

BY ANGELA STEIERT

Why is it that if I cut back a wayward branch on a tree, the most growth in the coming season is where I have pruned? Though I am uncomfortable admitting this, I suppose my life is the same. When I was young I grew up on mother's milk, Catholic schools and television. I remember meticulously planning my day around the many television shows I would watch. When I was 12, I even created a chart for the Christmas season so I could watch every holiday special. I cringe at the number of hours I spent passively in front of the television in my childhood. Then, when I was 15, I discovered the challenges of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Within a year TV had gone by the wayside; in its place came books.

In the landscape of books I was immersed in a new world of words, images and ideas. My vocabulary and perspective grew amazingly in the next few years. Books became my life for the next decade or so, but they were also getting overgrown. I felt safe in the bower of pages and texts I had built, but deep inside I began to feel stifled.

ANGELA STEIERT, a teacher at Jesuit High School in Portland, Ore., holds a master's degree in theological studies from the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif.



Following an invitation from a wise old woman in my neighborhood, I traveled with her to Our Lady of Guadalupe Trappist monastery outside of Portland, Ore. For 12 hours I immersed myself in silence, allowing myself to “be” rather than “do.” I walked around, sat in the forest and did very little reading of the many books I had brought along. Stripping myself of my constant busyness gave me a soul-surprising joy that I rode home on as I left that evening.

Something deep within me craved the deep connection found in that space of silence at the monastery. Being pulled in this new direction has been a slow process. I began trying to eke out time for contemplation.

Specifically, I began to sit out under the trees that surround my home, letting go of everything in my mind and life and instead being present to the gifts of creation. In essence, I sit and open myself to union with the divine. This need for deeper silence ultimately called me to sign up for an Ignatian eight-day retreat in Los Altos, Calif., at the Jesuit Retreat Center this past summer. The only way to fully express the transformative quality of my experience is to share a poem I wrote about a month after I returned from my retreat.

*bring me back
to the haven
of yesterday
place of
soul piercing
grace*

*the years
stripped from me
as I let go
the facades and
fences
constructed*

*exposed
standing in my
brokenness
I encountered*

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only in that
union
deep within
did I know
a peace
I could not name

Upon returning I have found many consolations filling my life. The deep pruning of dead branches on my retreat has allowed a personal spiritual growth I have not experienced before. In its place many new leaves are springing up. Some of those gifts include a new level of compassion and acceptance of self, deeper connection with the divine and a pull toward writing poetry. In the midst of this change, my day looks different. I spend my time and life energy in new ways, and I am all the richer for it. What other parts of my life will I prune next in my spiritual garden? The answer is my own journey to wholeness. 

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Luis's Journey

An unaccompanied teenager's search for safety

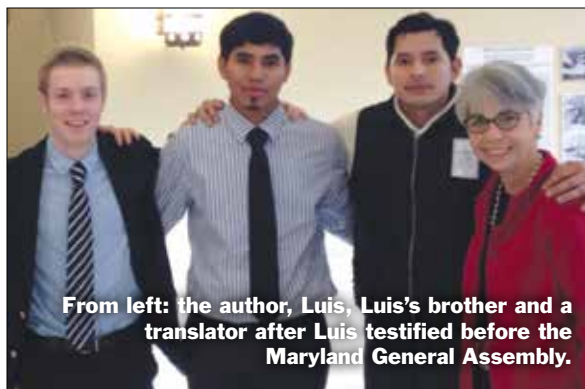
BY AUSTIN ROSE

Luis and I were both 17 years old when I met him two years ago. He seemed much older as he described his dangerous journey alone through the desert from El Salvador to the United States. His face was solemn, his words sparse and his eyes dark and emotionless. When he described fleeing El Salvador to escape daily abuse from his alcoholic father, however, he broke down into tears. It was then that I realized he was just a kid like me.

In 2014, almost 70,000 unaccompanied minors, mostly from Central America, entered the United States. Although the massive influx has since diminished, the children continue to come in large numbers. Our nation's immigration laws provide certain protections and, in some cases, pathways to citizenship for unaccompanied minors. But while the law is willing to make some exceptions for children, very often the American public is not. We sometimes label a vulnerable group of children as unwanted burdens or dangerous intruders—just as we do, unfortunately, many adult immigrants.

While volunteering for Catholic Charities of Baltimore Immigration Legal Services, where I helped to represent unaccompanied minors, I learned that seeing the clients as children was a crucial first step toward un-

derstanding the reasons they came and the ways they can be supported here in the United States. I also realized how my own Catholic faith fortifies this



perspective and provides a spiritual context for my work.

The U.S. Immigration System

Some politicians have claimed that the influx of immigrant kids was incited by a portion of the 2008 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, which mandates that minors from countries that do not border the United States, like El Salvador, must be held in the protection of the Office of Refugee Resettlement and, if possible, transferred to live with relatives rather than be immediately sent back to their countries of origin. One elected official insisted that policies like these “entice” minors from Central America to enter the country, as if they are seeking to take advantage of the law. Many ordinary Americans are also reluctant to see their government use its resources on foreigners who, in their eyes, are simply coming to claim a slice of American prosperity.

If people who share these views would sit with these children and hear their stories, they would likely change their minds. When Luis came to the United States, he knew nothing of our nation's immigration laws, let alone a portion of the T.V.P.R.A. that happened to apply to him. He did not come to get a better education or to get a good job. He fled his home when his father's abuse escalated to the point where the pain of staying outweighed the fear of leaving.

The young people I work with at the immigration law center share similar stories. They are applicants for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, a section of immigration law that provides relief from deportation and a pathway to citizenship for children who were abused, abandoned or neglected by one or both parents in their countries of origin. For them, the gang violence we hear about in the news is only part of the problem. Many, like Luis, flee their households because of serious abuse. Others grow up in debilitating poverty or lack support systems entirely.

Children from Central America bravely make the journey to the United States knowing and fearing the dangers that they will face. Luis was inches away from falling off “La Bestia,” the train that runs through Mexico to the U.S. border. Antonio was held at gunpoint for three days. Marta was raped. While providing humanitarian aid on the border this summer, I got a brief glimpse into what many unaccompanied minors experience. It was enough

AUSTIN ROSE, a sophomore at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., is a volunteer at Catholic Charities of Baltimore Immigration Legal Services and works with other organizations that promote justice for migrants.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

for me to realize that confronting the dangers of the desert at such a young age requires a combination of strength and desperation.

The Pursuit of Safety

A document from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops confirmed for me the observations I made in my time volunteering. The document explains that many people leave their countries of origin "because they are desperate and the opportunity for a safe and secure life does not exist in their own land." I discovered that this is especially true for unaccompanied minors. When we think of unaccompanied minors as immigrants simply looking for a better life, we are inclined toward exclusivity. We might argue that while we would like to give all people the opportunity to live in the United States, it is not possible in these times of economic uncertainty. But when we come to understand that most unaccompanied minors are traumatized children in need of help, we might be more will-

ing to welcome them.

I find that Catholic social teaching, especially as Pope Francis expresses it today, reinforces this compassionate perspective on migration. When I see how my church has bravely responded to recent migration trends, I feel encouraged to work even harder on behalf of these children.

In a joint pastoral letter, bishops from the United States and Mexico call for a more humane immigration policy, citing as biblical support Mt 25:35-40, in which Jesus says he is present in the foreign-born "stranger," the hungry and the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned and the ill. While the Bishops apply this passage to all migrants, I realized that it is especially relevant to unaccompanied minors, who represent all the suffering groups whom Jesus commands us to serve. They come in desperate need of food and water after a long journey. Their extreme vulnerability reflects nakedness. They are held in detention facilities at the border. And they are ill,

suffering from varying degrees of physical and emotional trauma. Jesus also reminds us that when we welcome a child, we welcome Christ (Mt 18:5).

Luis and I became good friends while I helped with his case. I sat alongside him when he testified before the Maryland General Assembly in support of a bill that would raise the maximum age of eligibility for cases like his to 21 from 18 to match federal law. Luis and his older brother did not understand all of the legal or political arguments behind the proposed bill. All they knew was that their 20-year-old sister was still back in El Salvador suffering, and they just wanted her to be safe. Their father's abuse had gotten even worse since Luis had fled. He threatened to kill the sister with a machete. After Luis bravely told his story in well-practiced English, he and his brother began to cry. Both young men were victims of abuse, and both had fled to the United States as scared and lonely kids, searching for someone to welcome them. ▲

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Humanities and the Soul

This semester Loyola University Maryland, where I teach, sponsored a weekend symposium on “Democracy and the Humanities.” The occasion was the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the National Endowment for the Humanities, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the enabling legislation on Sept. 29, 1965. The conference featured William Adams, the current chairman of the N.E.H., as a plenary speaker. National representatives from the Phi Beta Kappa Society, the Council of Independent Colleges, the American Council of Learned Societies and the Council of Graduate Schools—scholarly organizations that had helped to make the original case for the establishment of the N.E.H.—also addressed the symposium. Other panels explored current issues in the humanities on campus. I chaired a somewhat mysterious session on the relationship between Ralph Waldo Emerson and St. Ignatius Loyola.

The celebratory weekend recounted N.E.H.’s achievements. Thousands of scholars have received financial support for their research. (Full disclosure: I am the grateful recipient of an N.E.H. grant and am now studying the manuscripts of Madame de Maintenon, the secret wife of Louis XIV, under the eaves of the Municipal Library of Versailles.) Even more impressive have been the N.E.H.’s efforts to bring the humanities out of the classroom and to a broader public. The popular King Tut exhibit and “The

Adams Chronicles” on PBS were early, successful N.E.H.-funded projects for a large audience. Not all have been successful, however. As several conference speakers pointed out, the heyday of N.E.H. funding occurred during the Ford and Carter administrations. Since that golden age, the Congressional appropriation for N.E.H. has declined in terms of inflation-adjusted dollars. In the annual budget debate, Congressional voices still rise to condemn the endowment as a luxury for the cultural elite or a bastion of leftist political bias.

Like any contemporary conference on the humanities, the Loyola symposium quickly turned defensive. The job prospects for those pursuing a doctorate in the humanities are dismal. Few newly minted Ph.D.’s in history or philosophy will ever find a tenure-track position, let alone tenure, in their field of expertise. The Chronicle of Higher Education seems to specialize in horror stories about humanities Ph.D.’s who have descended into the purgatory of permanent adjunct-dom. One recent article recounted the travails of three adjuncting roommates who scrape along on food stamps and weekly visits to the Salvation Army canteen. Politicians readily support increased funding for STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) programs, but funding for recording Appalachian folk tales elicits yawns—or anger.

As core curricula are slashed to virtually nothing and government and foundation funds recede, practitioners of the humanities have become apol-

ogists for their beloved but apparently irrelevant fields. Unsurprisingly, the apology often takes a pragmatic turn. Courses in the humanities are praised for the practical skills they foster. Learning a foreign language can enhance one’s prospects for a job in health care. English courses perfect the writing skills necessary in practically any type of work. Philosophy helps people become logical problem-solvers. But this faux-

Practitioners have become apologists for their beloved but apparently irrelevant fields.

tech reduction of the humanities never quite satisfies. Other apologists defend the humanities as an initiation into human culture: its major texts, artifacts, historical events and leading ideas. But the current post-modern reign of “class/race/gender” approaches to cultural studies only confirms the suspicion that the humanities have become a bejeweled wrapper for political indoctrination.

Our Renaissance ancestors can help shape a more convincing apology for the humanities. With their ardent Platonism, they saw the ultimate stakes in humanist scholarship and education. It concerned the dilation of the soul. Through the reading of Virgil or participation in a philosophical debate or study of the causes of the Peloponnesian War, the soul is roused from the slumber of material routine. The good, the beautiful and the true become enticing—and pesky—next-door neighbors. The cash value of the humanities lies in their capacity to provoke transcendence as the soul awakens to deeper ways of being human.

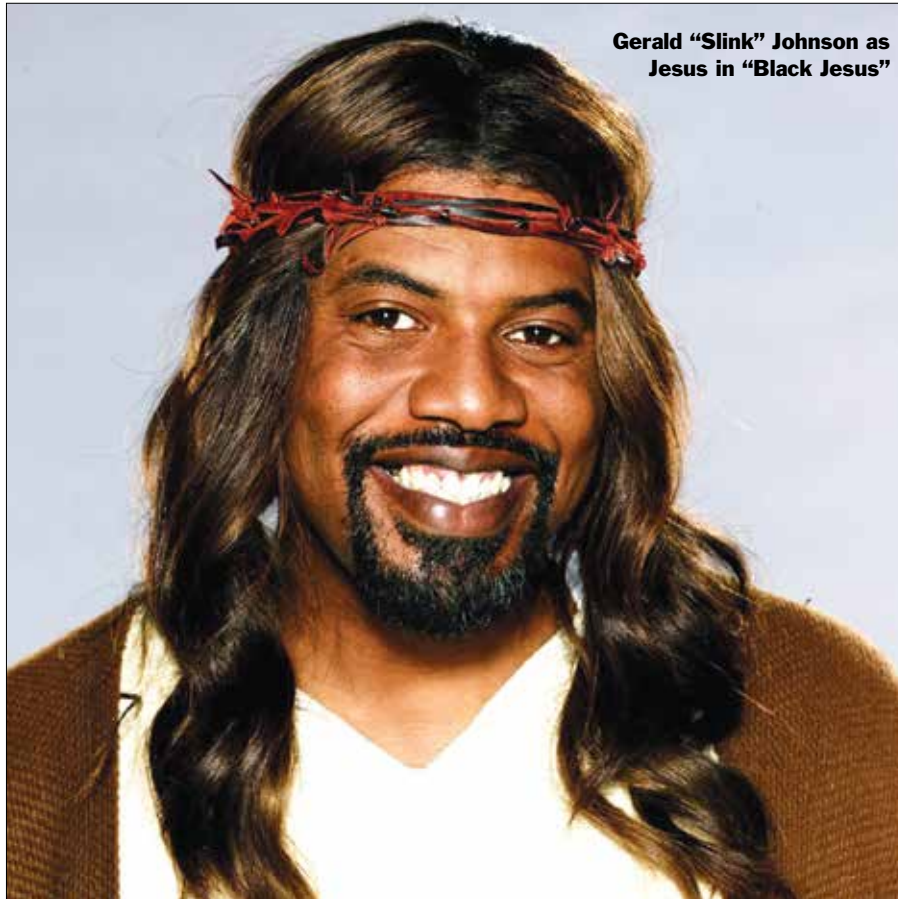
JOHN J. CONLEY

JOHN J. CONLEY, S.J., holds the Knott Chair in Philosophy and Theology at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore, Md.

TELEVISION | JIM McDERMOTT

'WHAT IF GOD WAS ONE OF US?'

Adult Swim's 'Black Jesus'



Gerald "Slink" Johnson as Jesus in "Black Jesus"

When the television producer Robert Eric Wise looks at ancient Judea, he sees a familiar world. "That was the hood," he told Vice Media in August of last year. "In fact, Judea was so much of a hood that Rome sent Pontius Pilate, the biggest thug governor in the empire, to govern it." (Ancient Jewish writers Philo and Josephus both describe Pilate's frequent provocations toward Jews, including hiding soldiers in crowds to randomly attack and kill Jewish protesters.) "Even though it sounds funny to say," muses Wise, "the real biblical and

historical Jesus was born and raised in the hood."

From Wise's idea of "Jesus in the hood" grew the live action television series **Black Jesus**, which recently finished its second season on Adult Swim. Set in the Compton neighborhood of Los Angeles, "Black Jesus" tells the story of a Jesus who dresses like the figure of old—heavy robes, sandals and long brown hair—but is very much a man of his new community, "smokin', drinkin' and chillin'" with his homies, as the pilot puts it. And when they say "smokin'," they don't mean cigarettes.

That's right. In many ways "Black Jesus" is far from the story you heard in Sunday school. In this version, the Son of God doesn't mind a toké every now and then. Nor is he afraid to push back when people become full of themselves. "Ms. Tudi, why you acting all bougie [short for "bourgeoise"] and s--- like you're some kind of angel or something," he asks one character. "How many times have I looked away with my holy and infinite gaze when you was doing janky s---?"

Likewise, when his pals complain about him always mooching their weed, he notes, "You do realize I died for your [expletive] sins?" "Ah, that s---'s getting old," one responds. "Homey," Jesus fires back, "that's my life!"

Still, as played by Slink Johnson, the character of Jesus is also absolutely familiar (and pretty wonderful). No matter what situation he is in or how frustrated he gets, Johnson's Jesus is always able to offer love and understanding. When some white kids from the suburbs try unsuccessfully to rob his homies (at gunpoint), he tells them: "I swear I wanna put my holy hand on you. But I forgive you. C'mon, look," he says with a playful warmth, pointing at one of them, "he look like a little smurf."

When a homeless alcoholic asks what Jesus can do for him, Jesus replies, "I got some kindness, I got compassion and I got love for all mankind."

"Ain't nobody want no s--- like that," the man replies, disgusted. A hilarious (and unprintable) argument ensues, at the end of which Jesus says, "I still love your b---- a-- by default, fool."

Every time Jesus greets anyone, he is ebullient, his joy in seeing them apparent and genuine. Even Vic, the landlord at the apartment complex where his friends live, a religious man who has nothing but insults for Jesus (and is

ultimately responsible for having him locked up in a mental institution), is always received by Jesus with open arms. “And bless you too, Vic,” he tells him after one round of mockery.

As one might imagine, this depiction of our Lord and Savior has not gone down well in all quarters. Upon the show’s debut, Tim Wildmon, president of the American Family Association, said, “If it’s possible for a cable television program to set a new record in deplorability, ‘Black Jesus’ did just that.” One Million Moms (a division of the A.F.A.) has issued regular press releases over the last two years, calling on advertisers to boycott the show (which airs on Friday nights at 11 p.m. E.S.T.), claiming that “The show makes a mockery of our Lord. The foul language use, including using the Lord’s name in vain, is disgusting. In addition there is violence, gunfire, drugs, and other inappropriate gestures which completely misrepresent Jesus. This is blasphemy!”

Others have criticized the portrayal of Jesus’ followers—some of whom are ex-cons, drug dealers and loafers—as racist, though in fact all the main characters on “Black Jesus” are the kind of people you’d like to have as friends. Yes, their choices are not always perfect, but they are good people, who listen to Jesus even when doing so demands sacrifice. For example, in the most recent season they agree to go legit because “Pops” (a k a God) wants it. The homies even take Jesus to task on occasion.

“This isn’t very Jesus-y,” one friend tells him after he suggests they should steal money back from a local pastor who has been stealing from his congregation.

Certainly, the language and subject matter may keep some people from ever watching “Black Jesus.” But it is a show worth considering, especially in this season, in which we celebrate the Incarnation. At Christmas we are able to largely whitewash over the edgy parts of the idea of God becoming human, the Nativity rendered as a story written by Charles Schulz.

But in fact the concept of the Incarnation has always been a reason both for great hope and great scandal. From conception to crucifixion, the Incarnation is God defying expectations, coming not as we anticipated or even as we hoped. Ask the Pharisees and the Saducees, even the disciples, or

Jesus’ parents (or a lot of Christians over the centuries), and they will tell you: Jesus hung out with the wrong people; he often said and did the wrong things; he died in the most scandalous of ways.

“Black Jesus” is definitely irreverent. But it is also that rarest of programs that attempts to recover the sense of surprise and shock that the coming of God inevitably brings, while also unabashedly embracing the warmth and kindness of Jesus Christ. Some of us might not be keen to imagine the Son of God smelling as if he just came from a Grateful Dead concert. But watching “Black Jesus” certainly offers a glimpse of the loving, joy-filled Lord we all hope someday to meet.

JIM McDERMOTT, S.J., a screenwriter, is *America’s Los Angeles correspondent*. Twitter: @PopCulturPriest.

Where Is He?

I station Beckett like Gotama, mid-table,
and spread before him

the Sunday comics. I’ve pored over

the Brueghelian welter:

each interstice of time, its tenants
and their possessions since Genesis,

secreted in a cartoon panel,
of exponential zeal and futility,
the size of a handkerchief.

The inventory of eternity,
shape-shifting, yet captured,
in pixilated frenzy.

Waldo’s somewhere in there,
gaunt, anonymous, camouflaged—

JOSEPH BATHANTI

JOSEPH BATHANTI, the author of eight books of poetry and a former poet laureate of North Carolina (2012-14), teaches creative writing at Appalachian State University. His new book of essays, *Half of What I Say Is Meaningless*, won the Will D. Campbell Award for Creative Nonfiction.

red and white striped jersey, spectacles,

bangs spilling from the stocking cap.

Every week he loses himself. One of us,
we must pluck him from this tangle.

The stakes are that high. I can never find him—
after hours and a magnifying glass.
Only Beckett—who can barely talk,

hasn’t walked yet—with the simple prompt:
Where’s Waldo? And, like a medium,
legs lotused, he gazes trance-like

into the newsprint, for mere seconds,
drops his finger, like a Ouija stylus,
into the roil and whispers, Waldo.

BOOKS

A GIFT OF SELF

A book is sometimes the most difficult gift to offer. Usually it is not the most expensive, but often it is the most rich. Sometimes it means the most when it comes from an older person to a younger one. Then it is the gift of self, imparting, one hopes, the joy and wisdom that have changed one life and now might change another. Ultimately, at any age, it is an expression of love.

Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.
Literary Editor

FERTILE GROUND

I recommend buying five copies of Marilynne Robinson's novel *Lila* and doling them out as follows. The first should go to a friend who's been a life-long atheist, who thinks all religion is patent, mean-spirited nonsense. Present the second copy to a cultured Christian friend, maybe on the East Coast or the West Coast, who associates small-town Midwestern Christianity with bigoted fundamentalism. Do you have a Jesuit friend who suspects that Calvinism is, theologically and spiritually speaking, a train wreck? Give the third to him. Send copy number four to an elderly friend, particularly one who finds little joy in the aging process. And save the last one for a friend who has spent a lifetime studying Christianity and who still often wonders how any honest person can possibly defend this religion. That's five. A rather extravagant sowing of the seed? Some will fall on rocky ground no doubt, but if just one takes deep root....

DENIS JANZ teaches the history of Christianity at Loyola University in New Orleans.

THE PATH AHEAD

The journalist Ben Montgomery's heart-felt and satisfying mini-epic *Grandma Gatewood's Walk* traces the quiet but

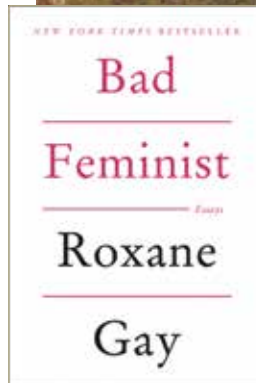
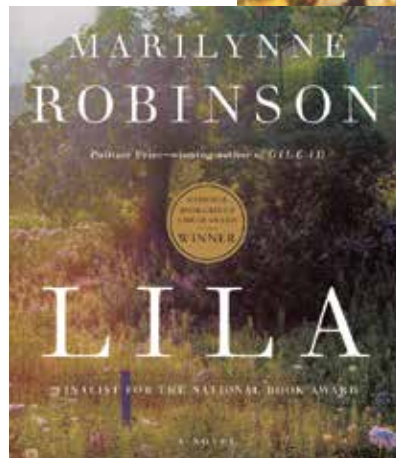
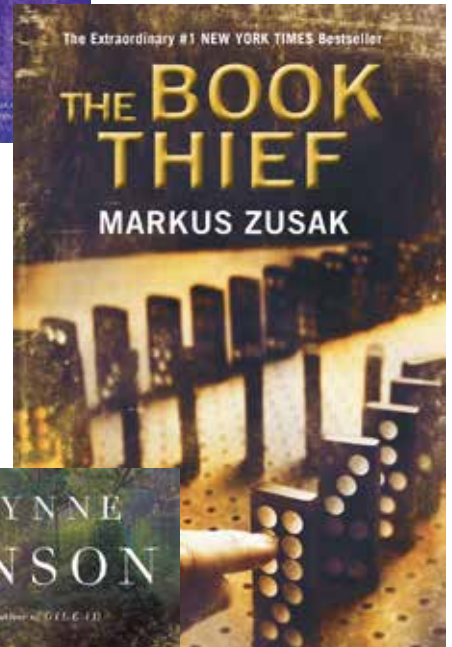
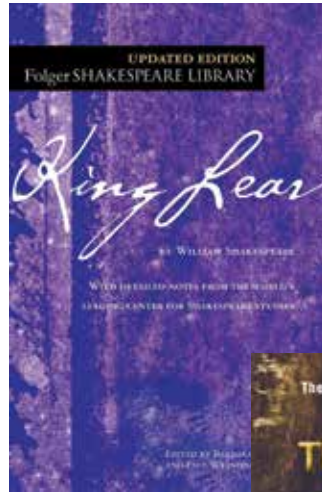
meaningful journey of 67-year-old Emma Gatewood, who in 1955 became the first person to hike the entire length of the 2,000-mile Appalachian Trail. Wearing a pair of Keds tennis shoes and carrying a simple bag (the accouterments of REI-style retail outdoorsmanship did not yet exist), Gatewood left her home in Ohio (without telling her children where she was going) and calmly, simply began hiking the trail on a spring day in Georgia. Montgomery diligently digs beneath the story of the woman dubbed "Grandma Gatewood" by a curious press that tracked her northward progress. He discovers that she was emotionally scarred yet resiliently, obsessively committed to her trek. What emerges is a powerful tale about finding solace not only

in nature, but also in the generosity of strangers—an ethic that still exists on the trail today.

HANK STUEVER is *The Washington Post's* television critic.

A MODERN, MEDIEVAL TALE

The Holy Sinner, by Thomas Mann, was one of those books I could not put down.



Through no fault of his own, Gregor is burdened with the guilt of his parents, and must face many trials before discovering who he really is. At first he is handed off to a kindly monk, but when he realizes that there is more to

his life story than he's been told, he sets off on a series of adventures that will lead him to the point of oblivion, literally chained to a rock. When he is rescued from his plight, he finally grasps his destiny and fulfills

his calling. I won't divulge the remarkable ending but will only hint that it will remind contemporary readers of a popular pope. Mann composed this book, the retelling of a medieval morality tale, while living in Los Angeles during his own exile from wartime Germany, .

PAUL CROWLEY, S.J., *teaches theology at Santa Clara University.*

CAN VIRTUE BE TAUGHT?

The word *leadership* will get a workout in the coming election year. But do you know what it is? Do you think leadership can be learned or taught? The ancient Greeks understood leadership to be part of *arete* (virtue). In Plato's *Meno* Socrates tries to search for a definition of virtue with a young Thessalian general called Meno. Although the search ends in failure because they resolve that virtue comes only as a gift from the gods and so is not teachable by humans, Socrates still offers hope. If a person could learn virtue then he would be like Odysseus—able to traverse the netherworld with the guidance of the blind Tiresias. While Tiresias knows, he does not see. While Odysseus sees, he does not know. Leadership, then, depends on engaging in spirited dialogue with others who can speak but do not show the way. For that, leaders must learn to look for themselves.

M. ROSS ROMERO, S.J., *an assistant professor of philosophy at Creighton University, Omaha, Neb., is the author of Without the Least Tremor: The Significance of the Sacrifice of Socrates (State University of New York Press, 2016).*

FLAWED, DEEPLY MORAL

When I gave *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak to a teenage friend, I hoped she would find it as inspiring as I did. I liked the substantive themes

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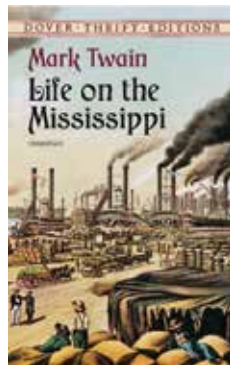
of family, community, friendship, the power of words and acts, the meaning of life and death; and I liked it that the author treats moral questions about poverty, tyranny and anti-Semitism historically. The characters are Germans living in a small town near Munich as World War II breaks out. It matters too that Liesel Meminger, the heroine, is no superhero endowed with superhuman powers. Superior powers can let ordinary readers off the hook, morally speaking. Instead, Liesel enters the story as a skinny, illiterate child, wounded by her brother's death and by her own situation—farmed out to foster parents. Hans and Rosa Hubermann, a flawed but deeply moral couple, provide a loving home for Liesel and an invaluable example. They harbor a Jew in their basement, an act of humanity for which they pay dearly. Like them, Liesel takes the consequences of her choice to act morally when her moment comes.

KAREN SUE SMITH, former editorial director of *America*, is immersed in art classes as a retiree.

A TRANSCENDANT ACCOUNT

My recommendation for any reader older than 16 is Mark Twain's *Life*

on the Mississippi. The great river has inspired countless poets, novelists, historians and Paul Simon, who sings of it as "shining like a national guitar" on Graceland. Twain captures the power and unpredictable personality of the Mississippi River as he found it in the late 19th century. The narrative flows with impeccable pacing and Twain's lyrical voice, yielding memorable profiles of the people he encountered in his travels, pitch-perfect descriptions of towns and cities, the early explorations and Indian communities, interlaced with a judicious crediting



of historians and sources in the text. The book can also be experienced as a viewfinder into the mind of a great writer. I am not aware of another work that also includes an advertisement for a forthcoming work, as Twain packs into an early chapter, an episode from *Huckleberry Finn*. You couldn't get away with that today, but it actually works. I have reread *Life on the Mississippi* several times and find it a transcendent account of American life,

with an optimism that appeals to readers of all ages.

JASON BERRY, an investigative journalist, is the author of several exposés of corruption in the Catholic Church.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

While many of my friends consider it an antiquated piece of Eastern European romanticism, I am still deeply moved by Henryk Sienkiewicz's 1895 masterpiece *Quo Vadis?* Sienkiewicz paints a narrative following the intrigues of the Emperor Nero, the early persecution of the Christians and the final days and death of the apostle Peter, with a love story connecting all three. This culminates when Peter is seen fleeing Rome and Christ appears to him and begins walking away, prompting Peter to ask Jesus, "Where are you going, Lord?" to which Jesus replies, "I am going to Rome to be crucified again," a fate Peter ultimately fulfills.

When I was in Rome in summer 2014, I walked along the Appian Way to the church of St. Mary, where this meeting is immortalized. Today, it continues to remind us that we must always ask ourselves where we are going in our daily lives.

NICHOLAS SAWICKI is currently a senior at Fordham University.

THE MEANING OF A MOVEMENT

Bad Feminist is a collection of essays by Roxane Gay, in which Ms. Gay explores what it means to be a "bad feminist"—that is, what it means to believe in the idea of feminism yet love so many aspects of our culture that have been traditionally defined as anti-feminist. *Bad Feminist* was so important for me when I first read it because it allowed me to delve deeper into what my own feminism meant to me, particularly



CARTOON WRITTEN BY JAKE MARTIN, S.J.; ART BY BOB ECKSTEIN

when she writes, “I believe feminism is grounded in supporting the choices of women even if we wouldn’t make certain choices for ourselves.” Ms. Gay’s work was also the first time I delved into feminist writing by a woman of color. Her writing is accessible, intelligent, funny and extremely thought provoking. For this reason, I would recommend this book to any curious, young woman or man interested in learning more about feminism—or to anyone who is interested in great contemporary writing.

OLGA SEGURA is an associate editor of *America*.

THE MEASURE OF FRIENDSHIP

My godson, Gabriel, is quickly approaching the age I was when I found a passion for the written word. As much as I appreciated my education in the humanities from a Jesuit university, I cannot say that it is something from the canon I would first give Gabriel. J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter series* taught me that it was okay to be an outcast, and what the true measure of friendship was. She crafted a world where choices define who you are and your abilities do not; where loss and grief are all too familiar emotions; where rules are broken once in a while, and sometimes you’re even rewarded for it. In many ways it was “the boy who lived” from Privet Drive who paved the way for an encounter with another boy who lived from first-century Palestine.

ZAC DAVIS, a graduate of Loyola University in Chicago, is an editorial assistant at *America*.

NO PLASTER SAINT

Patrick Jordan’s new book, *Dorothy Day: Love in Action*, is a clear, concise and keenly observed biography of the feisty, saintly and sometimes contradictory social activist Pope Francis praised

during his historic speech to Congress.

Since it is both very readable and inspiring, I recommend it to high school or college students as an introduction to a remarkable life—and also to those long familiar with Day, since Jordan offers fresh insights based on his association with her in the Catholic Worker movement. Jordan is a former managing editor of *Commonweal* who previously edited a collection of Day’s writings. His book, part of the Liturgical Press series “People of God,” is admirably brief and yet rich in detail. There is no plaster mold for this saint.

PAUL MOSES, author of *An Unlikely Union, on Irish and Italians in New York*, teaches journalism at Brooklyn College.

UNASKABLE QUESTIONS

King Lear is my favorite Shakespeare play, and in teaching it I stress Lear’s question to his daughters in Act I, Scene 1: “Which of you shall we say doth love us more”—“Which of you loves me most?” This is a question a parent should never ask—an “unaskable question”—and in *Lear* it ultimately brings about madness, suicide, murder, injustice, two ruined families, war and a country in turmoil.

And as I teach my students how to be human, I continue, “What are some other ‘unaskable questions?’” The answers are powerful, often heart-breaking: Never ask a childless couple, “Why didn’t you have children?” Never ask parents, “What’s wrong with your child?” If a parent, never ask, “Do you feel like you’re a success in life?” or, “Why aren’t you more like your sister/brother?” Never ask a veteran, “Why don’t you talk about your war experience?” or, or, or....

Knowing what not to ask is a stark but grand exercise in Christian and Jesuit humanism—and gentleness.

JOSEPH J. FEENEY, S.J., teaches English at Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia.

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

As an English professor, I have spent much of my life recommending books I love to young people. In fact, this is my job, a circumstance I celebrate daily. In 32 years of teaching, I have listed hundreds of books on my syllabus—each worthy to be read and reread—so choosing one is impossible. Since I can’t recommend all of them,

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PRINCIPAL. Xaverian Brothers High School in Westwood, Mass., (www.xbhs.com) educating young men in grades 7-12, is seeking a dynamic leader to serve as Principal beginning July 1, 2016. Sponsored by the Xaverian Brothers, Xaverian enjoys an outstanding reputation. The new Principal will replace the current Principal, who is retiring after 25 years of extraordinary leadership. The Principal is appointed by the Headmaster, with the approval of the Board of Trustees. Xaverian seeks a proven leader, with 3 to 5 years of administrative experience, holding an advanced degree, a relationship builder, a skillful communicator and a practicing Catholic. Candidates should submit a letter of application, résumé and references to the Search Committee electronically at dskala@xbhs.com, or mail to 800 Clapboardtree Street, Westwood, MA 02090.

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I'll settle for listing the books my students most love: Oscar Hijuelos's novel, *Mr. Ives' Christmas*; Andre Dubus's stories, *Dancing After Hours*; Mary Karr's poems, *Sinners Welcome*; and Thomas Merton's memoir, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. These are the books that speak to them, that move them, that change their minds and change their lives. If I could add my own best-loved books, they would be Flannery O'Connor's *Collected Stories*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. This magnificent seven constitutes a collection of wisdom books, each in its own idiom teaching us what it means to be a human being. They speak the languages of loss, redemption, forgiveness, mercy, goodness, grace and gratitude. Any one of them is gold.

ANGELA O'DONNELL, a regular columnist for *America*, teaches English at Fordham University.

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The Family of God

HOLY FAMILY (C), DEC. 27, 2015

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

“Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends” (Lk 2:44)

My sister-in-law posted a video on Facebook recently in which the oldest member of our family, my mother, soon to be 90 years old, is walking down the hall of her residence with a walker. In front of her, pushing a bright, primary-colored walker, is her great-grandson, soon to be 1 year old, babbling and cooing as he looks back at his great-grandmother. The picture envelops the generations of family and captures the beginning and the end of the stages of human life. Every stage is precious; every stage a sign of our love for one another and of God’s love for us.

My now elderly mother was born in a prairie farmhouse in Saskatchewan in 1926, prematurely and not expected to live; but her mother, her aunts and her older sisters did their best to keep her alive and thriving. Life is so ordinary and so precarious, yet families accept the risks and dangers as the love of family transcends these existential threats. It is not only mothers and fathers who choose life, though, but most significantly God.

Infertility was a mark of shame in many ancient cultures; and Hannah, Samuel’s mother, was unable to have a child. Finally, Hannah’s prayers were answered when she became pregnant and gave birth to Samuel. She saw her son Samuel as a gift from God, as truly every child is, and offered him back to God after he was weaned. Though most of us could not make Hannah’s

decision to offer her young son fully to God’s service at so young an age, all of us are intended to serve God.

For we not only belong to our families here on earth; we belong to God’s family. We see this in Hannah’s dedication of Samuel to God’s service in the Temple, and we see it in Jesus’ own recognition that the Temple in Jerusalem was his true home. But Jesus’ call to serve God and his recognition that he was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, took place within the context of his earthly family.

The only story of Jesus’ boyhood in the canonical Gospels, Lk 2:41–52, places the boy Jesus in the midst of an extended kinship network: “Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends.” His parents do not seem overly worried initially about the fact Jesus is missing, because they would expect him to be among their extended family of relatives and neighbors, including perhaps elderly grandmothers and wobbling toddlers.

Joseph and Mary are ultimately filled with anxiety (Lk 2:48), as any parents would be; and when they find their child, they ask him, “Why have you done this to us?” Jesus replies, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Jesus calls the attention of his earthly family to the precedence of God the Father in his life.

Jesus’ response points to the priority of God the Father over human family in general. A tension persists, even though Jesus has been found. The lost child was truly at home with God. As much as he is a child of Mary and Joseph, he is even more a child of God—in his case, the Son of God. As the First Letter of John tells us, though, we are all children of God, and all of us are intended for life with God the Father.

Christianity, following Judaism, did refocus the un-



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

Reflect on your extended family. How have they sought you out in a time of need? How have they helped you to come nearer to God? How have they taught you about God’s call for you?

derstanding of family to recognize the true family, which ultimately encompasses all of humanity and sees the true Father as God. Still, Jesus, like all of us, had responsibilities to the family and a place in the earthly family, as do 1-year-olds, 90-year-olds and everyone in between. Luke’s account ends with Jesus acknowledging his earthly parents’ authority, and Luke states that Jesus was obedient, or subject to them following his adventure. The way we come to know our heavenly family and heavenly call is through our parents, our extended families, those who raised us, who in encompassing us with love draw us nearer and nearer to God and our home with God.

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The Mother of God

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD (C), JAN. 1, 2016

Readings: Nm 6:22-27; Ps 67:2-8; Gal 4:4-7; Lk 2:16-21

“Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”(Lk 2:19)

The title Mother of God (Greek *theotokos*), is limited by definition. No one gave birth to God, but the title is true, as it defines Mary as the one who gave birth to the incarnate Son of God. It is a remarkable role Mary was called on to play, unbelievable in some ways, with which Mary had to come to terms before she gave birth to Jesus and even after giving birth to him. How could a young woman—we might even call her a girl—be called upon to give birth to the savior of the world?

The incarnation is nothing if not the means by which God came to humanity in order to raise us up to God. And when God came down to humanity, it was in order to live among us as a human being and to share with us in human life from beginning to end. Divinity taking on human nature changes our knowledge of who we are and of our eternal destiny, and it allows us to understand God’s nature more fully; but this does not mean that understanding God, ourselves or our role in the divine drama is simple.

Mary was visited by shepherds, Luke tells us, most likely boys who had the cold night watch with their sheep, protecting them from danger. The shepherds had received a visitation from an angel, who told them, “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Lk 2:11) and explained to them where to find the child. So the shepherd boys ran to Mary and Joseph

and told them what they had heard.

It seems that there were more people than just Mary and Joseph present, for we are told that “all who heard it were ‘amazed’ at what the shepherds told them.” Mary, however, was more than amazed, for she was the mother of this infant, a wondrous thing in itself. Mary, in fact, “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” This was not just an encounter with divinity, as it was for the shepherds, for this was Mary’s infant son, whom she had carried in her womb, the son she would nurse and raise.

The Greek word used here means to “hold, or treasure (in one’s memory),” but it could also mean to “keep in mind, or be concerned about” or even “to protect, defend against harm or ruin.” The word translated “ponder” means “consider, ponder, draw conclusions about.” What Mary is treasuring and pondering seems especially to be the *rhēmata*, which could be translated as “words” or “things” or “events.” All of these Greek words indicate that Mary was coming to terms not just with what had happened, or what she had been told, but what was still to happen.

It does not mean she understood all of these words or events, for when the 12-year-old Jesus was found in the Temple after three days and asked his frazzled parents, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:49), Mary and Joseph “did not

understand what he said to them” (Lk 2:50).

Did Mary understand what it meant that her son was Messiah, the Lord? Did she understand the way in which Jesus was the Son of God? Did she know how Jesus would die and understand the significance of it? Whether she understood immediately or not, she kept faith with God and that meant raising her son, taking him to be circumcised on the eighth day like every Jewish infant boy, teaching him Torah, feeding and caring for him. We can accept God’s ways and even be major players in God’s plan, but this does not mean that we understand all the ways of God. This is precisely the role of faith.

God’s ways are revealed in time and in the development of tradition. Because Mary became the Mother

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

Think of Mary, Mother of God. How has she allowed you to become closer to her son, Jesus? How has she revealed God more fully to you? How does her “pondering” and “treasuring” help you reflect on the ways of God in your life?

of God, the Son of God was born among us. And it is through Jesus that we are adopted into God’s family. The apostle Paul tells us: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” By becoming Mother of God she allowed us all to become children of God, sons and daughters crying out “Abba! Father!”

JOHN W. MARTENS

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