

# Mprairie Messenger



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*And there were in that same country shepherds, abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.  
And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*

*And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.  
For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

*And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.  
And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,  
Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward all.*

— Luke 2:8-14, King James Version



# Pope’s letter on *Amoris Laetitia* an official record

By Cindy Wooden

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Describing them as “authentic magisterium,” Pope Francis ordered the official publication of his letter to a group of Argentine bishops and their guidelines for the interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia*, his apostolic exhortation on the family.

According to a brief note by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, Pope Francis wanted his letter and the bishops’ document to be published on the Vatican website and in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, the official record of Vatican documents and acts.

The papal letter, dated Sept. 5, 2016, was written in response to guidelines published by the bishops in the Catholic Church’s Buenos Aires region. Pope Francis said the bishops’ document “explains precisely the meaning of Chapter VIII of *Amoris Laetitia*. There are no other interpretations.”

The letter is found on the Vatican website under letters written by the pope in 2016, and was published in the October 2016 edition of the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, which also is available online: <http://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/documents/2016/acta-ottobre2016.pdf>.

Cardinal Francesco Coccopal-

merio, president of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, told Catholic News Service Dec. 5, “The fact that the pope requested that his letter and the interpretations of the Buenos Aires bishops be published in the AAS means that his holiness has given these documents a particular qualification that elevates them to the level of being official teachings of the church.

“While the content of the pope’s letter itself does not contain teachings on faith and morals, it does point toward the interpretations of the Argentine bishops and confirms them as authentically reflecting his own mind,” the cardinal said. “Thus together the two documents became the Holy Father’s authentic magisterium for the whole church.”

Bishop Juan Ignacio Arrieta, secretary of the pontifical council and a prelate of the Apostolic Penitentiary, a Vatican court handling matters of conscience, told CNS that already in August, Pope Francis had ordered the Vatican newspaper to publish the Buenos Aires’ bishops’ guidelines and his response, which was “a clear manifestation of the pope’s judgment that their interpretation was clear and correct.”

The publication of both in the Holy See’s official gazette even more strongly “indicates the thinking of the Holy Father and does so collegially: a group of

bishops says something, and the pope associates himself with it.”

While it is up to theologians to discuss the full meaning of “authentic magisterium,” Arrieta said, for a canon lawyer like himself “this sets precedence for the whole church.”

The history of the church’s application of the Code of Canon Law, which provides general norms, is that specific applications of that law are refined through “precedence and analogy,” he said.

Arrieta also noted that the Buenos Aires bishops’ guidelines “carefully avoid one extreme and another.” They do not say all Catholics are welcome to receive communion no matter what their marital situation is, nor do they say no Catholic in a second marriage may access the sacraments.

The eighth chapter of *Amoris Laetitia* is titled, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness,” and is the most debated chapter of the document. It urges pastors to assist those whose marriages have faltered and help them feel part of the church community. It also outlines a process that could lead divorced and civilly remarried Catholics back to the sacraments.

Some church leaders and theologians have insisted reception of the sacraments is impossible for such couples unless they receive an annulment of their sacramental

marriage or abstain from sexual relations with their new partner.

The Buenos Aires document said the path of discernment proposed by Pope Francis “does not necessarily end in the sacra-

ments,” but should, first of all, help the couple recognize their situation, understand church teaching on the permanence of marriage and take steps toward living a more Christian life.



CNS/Rich Kalonick, Catholic Extension

**CARDINAL CUPICH VISITS PUERTO RICO —** Cardinal Blase J. Cupich of Chicago presents a \$40,000 cheque to Sister Luisa Caraballo Ortiz of the Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of the Rosary of Fatima Dec. 4 in Guanica, Puerto Rico. The funds were raised by members of St. Anne’s Parish in Barrington, Ill., in partnership with Catholic Extension to help poor communities throughout Puerto Rico. Cupich, chancellor of Catholic Extension, was visiting Puerto Rico Dec. 3 - 6 on behalf of Pope Francis.

## Asia youth are a sign of hope, pope says

By Junno Arocho Esteves

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Young people in Myanmar and Bangladesh are a source of hope for a peaceful future in their countries after years of war and suffering, Pope Francis said.

As is customary, at his general audience Dec. 6, the first after his Nov. 27 - Dec. 2 trip to Asia, Pope Francis reviewed his visit.

“In the faces of those young people, full of joy, I saw the future of Asia: a future that doesn’t belong to those who build weapons, but to those who sow brotherhood,” the pope said.

As temperatures in Rome hovered just above 4 degrees, the audience was held in the Paul VI audience hall to avoid the chilly weather.

The pope entered the hall, stretching his hands to each side of the aisle to greet people who reached out to touch him.

After telling the estimated 8,000 pilgrims that he wanted to speak about his recent visit, four Bangladeshi priests cheered loudly and held up a banner that read, “Thank you, Papa.” The pope smiled and waved at the small group.

Noting that it was “the first time a successor of Peter visited Myanmar,” the pope said he hoped to express “the closeness of Christ and the church to a people who have suffered due to conflict and repression and that now is slowly moving toward a new condition of freedom and peace.”

The Catholic Church in Myanmar is “alive and fervent,” he said, adding that he had “the

joy of confirming them in the faith and in communion.”

He also said his Nov. 29 meeting with a group of senior Buddhist monks was a moment to “manifest the church’s esteem for their ancient spiritual tradition and the trust that Christians and Buddhists together can help people to love God and neighbour while rejecting every kind of violence and opposing evil with good.”

Pope Francis said his visit to Bangladesh “followed in the footsteps of Blessed Paul VI and St. John Paul II” and “marked a further step toward respect and dialogue between Christianity and Islam.”

He also praised the country’s care for religious liberty and its welcoming of welcoming hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar.

“I wanted to express my solidarity with Bangladesh in their commitment to aid the Rohingya refugees flowing en masse in their territory, where the population density is among the highest in the world,” the pope said.

The “most significant and joyful event” of ordaining 16 new priests in Dhaka, he said, was “the sign of a living community where the voice of the Lord resounds, calling on them to follow him.”

This joy was also evident during his visit to the home in Dhaka where the Missionary of Charity sisters care for “so many orphans and people with disabilities,” Pope Francis said.

“And they never lack a smile on their lips,” the pope said. “Sisters who pray together, who serve the suffering continuously with a smile. It is a beautiful witness. I thank these little sisters so much.”

## Philippine gunmen kill retired social activist priest

MANILA, Philippines (CNS) — Gunmen killed a 72-year-old Catholic priest on the main Philippine island of Luzon Dec. 4, a day after police killed a pastor they tagged as a member of the communist New People’s Army.

Ucanews.com reported that unidentified men shot dead Rev. Marcelito Paez around 8 p.m. while he was driving in San Leonardo, about 177 km northeast of the capital. The priest died almost three hours later at a local hospital.

The attack occurred hours after Paez, a retired priest of the San Jose diocese and a national board member of the Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, facilitated the release of a political prisoner in Cabanatuan, the provincial capital.

The Rural Missionaries of the Philippines is a national intercongregational organization of priests and laypeople that works with peasants and indigenous people. Paez was also the group’s Central Luzon co-ordinator.

San Jose Bishop Roberto Mallari and other clergy condemned the killing and demanded justice. In a statement, Mallari said Paez once headed the justice and peace desk of the diocese’s social action commission, bringing him in close contact with poor workers and farmers.

New People’s Army.

However, ucanews.com reported the pastor’s relatives and critics denied the charge and said police planted a gun after shooting him just five minutes away from his residence. Human rights groups said no gun residue was found on the victim’s arm, supporting the idea of a planted gun.

On Nov. 16 in Jabonga, gunmen shot dead United Church of Christ of the Philippines lay pastor Perfecto Hoyle.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has branded the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People’s Army “terrorist” groups. The president also threatened to go after legal activist groups. His spokesperson said groups and individuals suspected of “conspiring” with the underground movement would be included as targets.

Duterte later told soldiers they can shoot unarmed civilians if they feel threatened. He promised the military legal protection from human rights cases, the same pledge offered to a police force that has killed close to 4,000 suspected drug addicts and dealers.

Paez was known as an activist. A former parish priest, he once led the Central Luzon Alliance for a Sovereign Philippines, which campaigned for the removal of the U.S. military bases in Central Luzon and other parts of the country.

On the day he was killed, Paez had facilitated the release of an organizer of a farmers’ group arrested by the army in March.



CNS/Katie Rutter

**TOWN NAMED AFTER SANTA CLAUS —** A sign welcomes visitors to the town of Santa Claus, Ind. Proud of their namesake, townspeople host Christmas celebrations all through December. A team of “Santa’s Elves” replies to thousands of letters from children Dec. 2 at the Santa Claus Museum. As the only U.S. town named “Santa Claus,” the Indiana village receives, and replies to, letters addressed to Santa.



# Race, religion are primary factors in hate crimes

By Michael Swan  
The Catholic Register

TORONTO (CCN) — The latest number of police-reported hate crimes in this country is small, but that shouldn't be comforting news to Canadians.

"We like to hold on to the notion that Canadians value something called multiculturalism or pluralism," said Pamela Divinsky, executive director of The Mosaic Institute, a think-tank that promotes dialogue within diverse communities. "But there is growing discomfort with differences."

There was a three per cent uptick in hate crimes in 2016 compared to 2015, for a total of 1,409 hate crimes over 12 months. The reported crimes specifically targeted religions, racial and ethnic minorities or gays, lesbians and transgendered people.

That represents less than 0.1 per cent of all crime, but statisticians warn that hate crimes are very likely to be underreported.

Officially reported and recorded hate crimes "probably reflects even less than five per cent of discriminatory behaviours," said Divinsky.

Race and ethnicity accounted for nearly half (48 per cent) of hate crimes, with South Asians, West Asians and Arabs increasingly targeted and black Canadians still the No. 1 target. Black Canadians are victims in 15 per cent of all hate crimes.

Religion is the motivating factor in one-third of all hate crimes, with 460 criminal acts directed at religious people or places. As in every survey that has ever been

taken on the subject, Canadian Jews remain the No. 1 target for religious hatred. Even though they represent just one per cent of Canada's population, Jews are the victims in 16 per cent of all hate crimes and 48 per cent of all religiously motivated hate crimes.

Muslims are increasingly targeted and now absorb 10 per cent of hate crimes in general and 30 per cent of religiously motivated hate crimes. Reported attacks on Muslims have risen 40 per cent since 2014.

Catholics, who are 39 per cent of Canada's population, are victims in just two per cent of hate crimes and were targeted 27 times in 2016.

Sexual orientation sparked 13 per cent of Canadian hate crimes in 2016, but crimes against gays and other sexual minorities were the most violent. Seventy-one per cent of hate crimes directed against sexual minorities were violent, compared with 43 per cent of hate crimes in general that were classed as violent.

Year-over-year, violent hate crimes rose 16 per cent, from 487 violent incidents to 563.

"We should definitely be looking at ourselves and examining what our attitudes are to people who are different from ourselves," said Archdiocese of Toronto ecumenical and interfaith affairs officer Rev. Tim MacDonald. "Not only in terms of sexuality, but also in terms of religion and ethnic background."

Catholics have a wealth of church teaching that condemns violence and contempt for others, MacDonald said.

"If you want to think about Pope Francis' idea of developing a culture of encounter — well, he's not talking about a culture of encounter with people who are the same," MacDonald said.

Rather than suspicion or dismissal of customs, practices and people who are different, any Catholic must ask, "What can we

learn from that culture that's different from ours, and that religion that's different from ours?" MacDonald said.

Religion has a key role to play in dismantling entrenched prejudice, said Divinsky.

"People don't actually change their positions on any of this stuff through data or reason. Because

this doesn't operate in the reason territory. It operates in the emotional territory," she said. "It would be nice if facts could dismantle those prejudgments, but they don't."

However, religious values and traditions can be brought to bear

— PREJUDICES, page 9



Frank Flegel

**NUNCIO'S VISIT — Archbishop Luigi Bonazzi, Apostolic Nuncio to Canada, met informally with chancery staff and Archbishop Donald Bolen in Regina Nov. 27. That same day he met with the Sisters Association of Regina Archdiocese and invested Bolen with the pallium to officially denote his position as archbishop and metropolitan of Saskatchewan. The nuncio returned to Ottawa the following day.**

## Apostolic Nuncio has busy week

By Frank Flegel

REGINA — Archbishop Luigi Bonazzi, Apostolic Nuncio to Canada, spent a busy week in Saskatchewan. He arrived in the province Nov. 22 and left Nov.

28, and made several stops during that short time.

On Nov. 23 he was present for the installation of Bishop Mark Hagemoen as the eighth bishop of Saskatoon. He visited the Saskatoon and Prince Albert dioceses,

making a stop at St. Peter's Abbey in Muenster along the way, and he also met with the Regina archdiocese office administration.

On Nov. 27 he invested Regina Archbishop Donald Bolen with the pallium to officially denote his position as archbishop and metropolitan of Saskatchewan. On the morning of that same day, he had met with the Sisters Association of Regina Archdiocese (SARA), and then with the Regina chancery office staff.

SARA president Marion Grady, a member of the Secular Institute Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (OMMI), said of their meeting with the nuncio, "He asked a lot of questions about the Our Lady of the Missions congregation (RNDM), as he noticed from the introductions that it's the largest group of sisters in our entire membership. He particularly wanted to know about when the sisters had come to Canada."

He also spoke with the sisters from the Philippines who first came to Regina with some other sisters who are now established in Calgary. A group photo was taken to commemorate the occasion and then Bolen escorted him across the hall to the staff room.

Coffee with the chancery staff was more informal, and Bonazzi took the opportunity to talk about his mission as nuncio and his mission in the church, saying that it "gives value to my life, and is up to me to perform."

There was some back-and-forth bantering among the nuncio and the staff and Bolen before a group photo was taken and the two archbishops left for yet another appointment.

The Regina visit was particularly busy, and the next day he returned to Ottawa.

## Healthy soil plays key role in ending global hunger

By Amanda Thorsteinsson

WINNIPEG — World Soil Day fell on Dec. 5 this year. It is a day set aside by the United Nations to acknowledge the importance of healthy soil and to advocate for the sustainable management of soil resources. This year the Canadian Foodgrains Bank reflected on the importance of continued attention to soil health as a means of ensuring global food security.

Healthy soil plays a key role in ending global hunger, yet it is rarely discussed outside the world of agriculture. The ability to access fertile soil is critical to ensuring that people can grow their own food, or grow food they can sell to earn an income.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, 12 million hectares of fertile land are lost every year to urbanization, climate change, and erosion. At the same time, the quality of the topsoil that remains continues to degrade.

The problem is especially pronounced in Africa, where soils are easily degraded by continuous cultivation. According to the *International Journal of Soil Sustainability*, almost one-third of the crop land in sub-Saharan Africa is degraded owing to pressure from growing populations, inadequate environmental management, and lack of nutrient

replenishment. That figure rises to almost half in areas of high agricultural activity, such as the highlands of Ethiopia.

This has significant repercussions for the work of ending hunger. Globally, most people who experience hunger are small-scale farmers, many of them in Africa.

"You can't talk about ending global hunger without addressing the issue of soil fertility," says Theresa Rempel Mulaire, the manager of Scaling-Up Conservation Agriculture in East Africa for the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

Through this program, which is supported by a \$14-million matching grant from the Government of Canada, the Foodgrains Bank is supporting some 50,000 farmers in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Kenya in improving the quality of their soil. The aim of the program is to ensure that local families no longer experience hunger.

Through training, extension workers, and ongoing farmer-to-farmer support, growers are learning to implement conservation agriculture techniques. It is an approach that emphasizes minimal soil disturbance, crop rotation, mulching, and cover crops to improve soil health and fertility, and thus increase production.

"Our goal is to move from conservation agriculture on a project-by-project basis to a set of practices that are natural and nor-

mal for African farmers to use in their day-to-day lives," says Rempel Mulaire.

One of the biggest successes the team has observed is the interest the program has generated among high-ranking officials from Ethiopia's Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Foodgrains Bank staff were initially concerned that government extension workers in Ethiopia might not be interested in conservation agriculture techniques, and might even counsel farmers against using them.

"Conservation agriculture techniques differ from the conventional farming systems that people have been using to grow food for generations," says Rempel Mulaire. "Encouraging people, particularly government officials, to adhere to a certain curriculum is difficult."

The reaction from Ethiopian officials came as a welcome surprise. On being presented with policy and background information, the ministry expressed interest in including conservation agriculture principles in their official soil health manuals. But first they wanted to see for themselves what conservation agriculture projects looked like on the ground, and speak to the farmers themselves.

At the end of November, staff from Ethiopian partners managing the conservation projects on behalf

of the Foodgrains Bank took 11 officials from the Ministry of Agriculture to three different regions of Ethiopia where the projects are being implemented. The group included officials who were in favour of the initiative as well as some who were skeptical.

"From the beginning, the ministry team was very inquisitive," reports Frew Beriso, a conservation agriculture technical specialist at the Foodgrains Bank who provides support to the program. "They asked a lot of questions of the farmers and the partner staff. By halfway through the visit, however, it seemed that most of them were more than satisfied. I don't think they expected to see such a noticeable difference between conservation agriculture and conventional farming techniques. Seeing the projects in person really solidified things for them."

"The project visit and subsequent inclusion of conservation agriculture techniques into official government curriculum are significant," says Rempel Mulaire. "It makes the changes we're working on more sustainable."

The Canadian Foodgrains Bank is a partnership of churches and church agencies working to end global hunger. In the 2016 — 2017 budget year, the partnership provided over \$41 million of assistance to over 900,000 people in 35 countries.



# A mother’s palliative care leads to renewed faith

By **Thandiwe Konguavi**  
**Grandin Media**

EDMONTON (CCN) — Margie Harper entered the hospital last year on the first day of Lent, her forehead still bearing a dark smudge from the Ash Wednesday mass.

At first, her daughters Margo Harper and Carolynn Bilton thought their mother had pneumonia and that she would recover. But it quickly became clear that she would not be going home to Paintearth Lodge, the seniors home in the central Alberta town of Castor where she had lived her last years.

So Margo and Carolynn settled into the palliative care room of Our Lady of the Rosary Hospital for the longest sleepover they’d had with Mom since they were children — and a life-changing lenten journey by her side.

“At one point in Mom’s last days, she asked . . . if we were all together in hospital on a spiritual retreat,” said Margo. “We didn’t know it then, but Mom, the answer is yes. ‘Yes we were, and yes we are.’”

Margie died on April 1, a full 30 days after entering the Castor hospital. She was 97. Her end-of-life journey was featured in *Lasting Impressions*, the 2017 annual report to the community by Alberta-based Covenant Health, Canada’s largest Catholic health care provider.

The story underscores the significant impact that palliative care — the practice of alleviating pain and suffering for patients as they near death — can have on a person and their family. It’s a growing discipline in medicine, but one to which the majority of Canadians have no access.

“It was a beautiful, final time, a beautiful death,” remembers Carolynn. “What was so beautiful was that the hospital allowed us the space to make this journey with Mom.

“I believe that people have different experiences with this death journey, but I also really believe that most people don’t want to walk the journey alone. And I believe that our experience speaks to the philosophy of the Catholic hospitals’ real respect for life and real respect for the dying and for their families.”

Margie’s last days on earth were filled with singing, poetry, champagne, cake, laughter, lots of prayer, lots of tears, and lots of family.

“She was dying and we were supporting her dying process, but there was also living,” said Margo.

Extended family members gathered around her bed, holding hands, reminiscing about the past, sharing grief, sharing joy. “Children and grandchildren kissing Mom goodbye, stroking her hands, experiencing death and loss not from a distance but up close, seeing that death is normal, natural, and not something to be feared.”

“Even though she was in excruciating pain at times, I could see her transcend that and kind of give over her spirit to the people who came to see her,” said Margo. “And she created this kind of sacred space that was just full of love.”

For Margo, a Vancouver-based journalist who had pulled away from her faith over the years, the experience brought renewal.

“I think this journey with Mom was a real return,” she said. “We experienced the power of prayer, particularly Hail Mary. We felt the absolute healing power of prayer and the comforting power of prayer in a way that I think I had not before. It feels like a much more personal God to me than I had ever experienced.”

“She seemed often to be looking at heaven, at Jesus, at the great mystery,” added Carolynn. “Whatever it was, in the end there was no fear, no grasping, no clinging to this world. She was moving on. It was a tremendous thing to witness. I believe that Mom taught us not only how to live but she also taught us how to die.”

It was the renewed faith the sisters received at that hospital bedside that gave them the power and strength to care for their dying mother who, having been a nurse herself for 45 years, had cared for so many others in her life.

“My mom really believed that in every sick person, in every lonely person, in every abandoned person, you saw the face of Christ,” said Margo. “I really believe the renewal of my faith gave me and my sister and family the personal strength and capacity to be with Mom in her — at times — very dark hours.”

For the baby boomer generation, whose parents are now aging, death is the next frontier, said Margo.

“We’re all going to have to confront it, and are we going to warehouse our dying? Are we going to lock them away? Are we going to isolate them, or are we going to actually experience it as a journey of faith and as a part of life? That’s kind of what it meant to me.”

The day before Margie died, the family celebrated Margo’s 57th birthday in the hospital room.

“I kissed Mom’s cheek and whispered in her ear, ‘Thank you for giving me life, Mom.’ Her eyes were closed, but I’m pretty sure she squeezed my hand,” said Margo. “I like to think she willed herself to see my birthday.

“She had tremendous FOMO (fear of missing out) and there’s nothing more she loved than a good party, so she was gonna stay alive for the last party and she did.”

“The conversation starts with what is most important to you, and what is the kind of care and quality of life that you wish.”

Dr. Konrad Fassbender, Scientific Director for the Covenant Health Palliative Institute, says a patient-centred philosophy is foundational to palliative care. In other branches of medicine, the medical specialist makes recommendations to the patient based on their expertise, but in palliative care, the patients tell the caregivers what is important to them — whether it’s wanting to stay alive for a daughter’s birthday party or a graduation, or to see a pet one last time.

“In palliative care, the conversation starts with what is most important to you, and what is the kind of care and quality of life you wish, and how do we achieve that,” said Fassbender. “That’s

called patient-centred care.”

Anik Kuefler, a registered nurse at Our Lady of the Rosary Hospital, described Margie as a leader in her care.

“Being a nurse herself, she really needed the details of what we were doing, what the physicians said and what their thought process was,” Kuefler said in a prepared statement. “She always respected opinions but always in the end made the decisions for her own health.”

“She lived a life of such digni-

ty, as a community member and a nurse. I witnessed that in her life as well as her death.”

The way health care providers look after the dying has changed. Fassbender notes that advances in medical technology over the last 100 years have doubled the average lifespan, with the result that medicine as a whole has become focused on extending the length of life. Think of the words often used around cancer cases: fight, be a champion, survive.

“A lot of the language within

medicine is around the concept of extending life at any option,” he said. “What we’re learning and what we’ve learned through the last 40 years in palliative medicine is that the dying process should not be focused exclusively on extending the length of life but that we should also look at the quality of life. So another way of defining palliative care is to say that it is the art and practice of medicine that focuses on improving the quality of life.”

— PALLIATIVE, page 8



Cadence Christensen

**BOUNDLESS LOVE** — “Because of his boundless love, Jesus became what we are that he might make us to be what he is.” — Irenaeus, Third century (Cadence Christensen is a Grade 1 student at Christ the King in Shaunavon, Sask, Holy Trinity Catholic School Division.)

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year  
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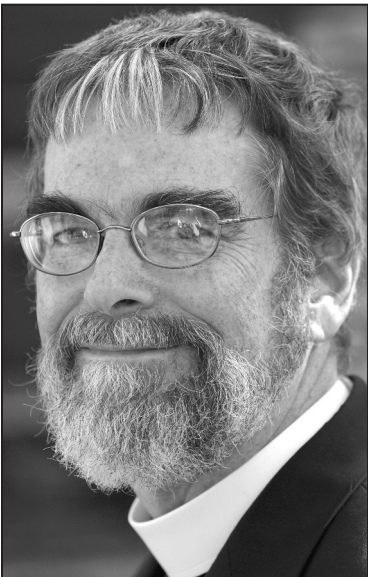
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# Vatican astronomer speaks on science, faith, and ‘awe’

By Agnieszka Krawczynski  
The B.C. Catholic

VANCOUVER (CCN) — Anyone who has seen the rings of Saturn through a telescope and exclaimed, “Oh my God!” is proof that faith and science are compatible, says Br. Guy Consolmagno, researcher, astronomer, Jesuit, and director of the Vatican Observatory.



CNS/Paul Haring  
Jesuit Brother Guy Consolmagno

“The very thing that makes us different from a cow or a cat, the very thing that makes you go ‘Oh my God,’ I call the human soul,” said Consolmagno to 375 science teachers, students, and others at UBC’s Hebb Theatre in Vancouver Nov. 22.

“Science only happens because of the ‘Oh my God!’ moments. Nothing would happen without them.”

Before he joined the Vatican observatory or became a Jesuit, Consolmagno was a 33-year-old post-doctoral fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He had received undergraduate and master’s degrees from MIT, then a doctorate from the University of Arizona, all in planetary science.

Yet, while walking on the bridge across Charles River to his MIT office, he realized he had hit a crisis point in his scientific career. He asked himself: “Why

am I knocking myself out trying to understand the moons of Jupiter when there are people starving in the world?”

Consolmagno quit astronomy and burned almost all of his scientific papers. He joined the Peace Corps and flew to Kenya, where he ended up teaching astronomy at a high school where most of his students were orphans. When the locals realized he had a PhD, they insisted he teach astrophysics at a nearby university instead.

He spent two years in Kenya. Every weekend he had a chance, he would pull out his telescope and scan the night sky. “Everybody in the village would come out and they would look at the moons of Jupiter,” he said.

“In those days, I had a very clever cat, but my cat never wanted to look through the telescope. It was just interested in getting fed.” An interest in stars “is one of those things that makes us more than just well-fed cows.”

The human curiosity about galaxies beyond and the “oh my God!” reaction is “what theologians call the image and likeness of God. We don’t live by bread alone. It’s literally true.”

After two years in Kenya, Consolmagno returned to the United States and became an assistant professor at Lafayette College in Easton, Pa. He joined the Jesuits in 1989 and quickly became an astronomer for the Vatican Observatory and curator of the Vatican’s meteorite collection.

“I’ve had a few moments big enough to publish in (the scientific journal) *Science*,” but it’s not what excites him about going to work every morning.

His motivation “is the gasp of amazement when I saw a pattern in nature that no one had anticipated before. It comes with it a burst of joy. That joy is very much the same joy that C.S. Lewis talks about in *Surprised by Joy*. It’s the presence of God.”

He now finds immense joy in studying the heat capacity and other qualities of meteorites. He challenged his audience to seek

out moments of awe in their lives as well.

“If you are a scientist or an artist or whatever it is you are doing, and you have lost touch with that source of joy, think about it and ask yourself: How can you get it back? That’s what will move you to do the really wonderful work that makes you and the community you share it with to go: ‘Oh my God.’”

He added that faith is not blind trust, but a recognition that no one knows all the facts.

“It’s when you have to make decisions in the face of inadequate data, that’s when you need to have faith,” he told hundreds of Vancouver scientists and students.

“It’s proceeding even after you’ve done everything you can do to see and you know you can’t see everything. We never have all the facts; faith is how we

deal with the fact that we have to proceed anyway.”

That faith is important for everyone, including scientists, new parents starting a family, people joining religious life, or families moving to new homes, cities, or countries.

“Where is your heart? Which is to say: where is your God? What does that tell you about the kind of God you worship?”

The free lecture was co-sponsored by UBC’s department of physics and astronomy as well as St. Mark’s College.



Trisha Doblaz

**GLORIOUS DAY** — “This is the glorious day on which Christ himself, the Saviour of the world, appeared; the prophets foretold him, the angels worshipped him; the magi saw his star and rejoiced to lay their treasures at his feet.” — Office of Readings, Roman Rite. (Trisha Doblaz is a Grade 4 student at St. Agnes in Moose Jaw, Sask., Holy Trinity Catholic School Division.)

## Ternier-Gommers ordained Anglican priest

By Felix Kryzanowski

SASKATOON — St. John the Evangelist Anglican Cathedral was packed with worshippers and well-wishers for the ordination to the priesthood of Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers and Sheldon Carr.

Many of the assembly consisted of Roman Catholic friends of Ternier-Gommers.

Ternier-Gommers is familiar to

Roman Catholics as a leader of the liturgy of the Word and communion in the absence of a priest, as a retreat leader, as a homily writer, and as a person who has given reflections on the Scripture readings at the end of mass, but not during mass, the latter act being reserved only to men ordained in the Roman Catholic Church. She is also a regular columnist with the *Prairie Messenger*, where in her “Double Belonging” column she has shared her journey of transition to the Anglican Church.

Two Roman Catholic priests along with many Anglican priests and several ministers of other denominations vested and took

part in the liturgy’s entrance procession and the laying on of hands. Four other Roman Catholic priests attended without vesting. Several Roman Catholic religious sisters and one religious brother were also in attendance.

Rt. Rev. David M. Irving, presiding Anglican bishop, welcomed all baptized Christians to the open eucharistic table. Many Roman Catholics availed themselves of the invitation.

When asked if we are here witnessing what Richard Rohr, OFM, call “the emerging church,” a Lutheran pastor commented that she has participated in similar liturgies with Roman Catholics for the past few years.



**ANGLICAN ORDINATION** — Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers (left) and Sheldon Carr (seated, right) were ordained Anglican priests in Saskatoon Nov. 30. With them are bishop David Irving, bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Saskatoon (centre), and clergy members of other denominations. Ternier-Gommers serves the Anglican and Lutheran parishes in Watrous, Sask. Carr is serving the Anglican parish in Borden, Sask.

Abbot Peter Novocosky, OSB  
and the monks of St. Peter’s Abbey  
wish the readers of the *Prairie Messenger*  
new eyes to see  
and new ears to hear  
the new life that is born for us  
at Christmas.



Live in hope. Live in love. Live in Shalom.



# Regina APC discusses priorities

# Sowing Seeds Award honours Villa Rosa

By Frank Flegel

REGINA — Liturgical changes and the next steps in implementing the four archdiocesan priorities announced in August were among the topics discussed at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council (APC) meeting Dec. 2 in Christ the King Parish Hall.

The discussion on liturgical changes was initiated by Archbishop Donald Bolen who, over the past two months, engaged in conversations within the archdiocese about celebrating the liturgy, and whether there might be some simple changes or moves toward greater consistency. He told the meeting that it is now six years since the new Roman Missal was introduced, and while no major changes are anticipated, this was an opportunity to provide clarification in some areas where there is confusion, and move to greater unity in other areas.

APC members pointed out that there are differences in practice at local masses, ranging from when parishioners are kneeling, stand-

ing, or sitting before, during, and after communion; when liturgical volunteers should bow toward the altar, and when and where readers, proclaimers, and other liturgical ministers should sit while awaiting their cue. They also spoke of the value of a unified approach in training laypeople as readers, proclaimers, and eucharistic ministers.

While acknowledging that there is room for local adaptation on some matters, Bolen said there is a desire that there be consistency in liturgical practices on essential matters throughout the archdiocese. He was appreciative of the discussion, and indicated that he had also initiated a consultation on the subject with the priests of the archdiocese, and was planning to take it up with the Council of Priests at their next meeting. He later told the *Prairie Messenger* that he hoped to issue a pastoral letter some time in January outlining refinements to address some of the concerns raised by the clergy and people of the archdiocese.

The meeting also spent consid-

erable time on presentations and table discussions on the next steps to be taken to move forward with the four priorities Bolen had spelled out in August:

- 1) Building vital and viable parish faith communities;
- 2) Living Evangelization and Discipleship;
- 3) Listening, Engaging in Dialogue, seeking Justice and Reconciliation; and
- 4) Growing in Faithful and Responsible Stewardship.

At the time of the announcement, the archbishop said he had arrived at the priorities after a period of discernment that included prayer and a wide consultation process with clergy, religious women, staff, the lay faithful, Catholic organizations, parish leaders, and community partners.

Leah Perreault, consultant to the archbishop, said the next steps are “to get us to a concrete work plan,” so that the different groups and individuals in the archdiocese can see what the plan is to do this work and how the priorities will be accomplished.

By Monique Gauthier

WINNIPEG — Guests gathered at St. Gianna Beretta Molla Church Nov.19 for the Sowing Seeds Award banquet to honour and celebrate the work of Villa Rosa, this year’s recipient. The award was accompanied by a cheque in the amount of \$5,000.

The Sowing Seeds Award is made possible through the Grain of Wheat Legacy Fund, established by the Living Waters Columbarium in memory of the deceased who are entombed and memorialized within and beyond the columbarium. The Sowing Seeds Award recognizes a group or organization for its commitment to transform the world by choosing unconditional love and sacrifice.

Each year, families of the deceased enrolled in the Grain of Wheat Legacy Fund are invited to consider the passions of their loved ones and to nominate an organization or group that endeavours to transform the world through work that reflects those passions. In this way, the de-

ceased continue to be present through the transformative work they embraced during their lives.

The work of Villa Rosa resonates with the lifelong efforts of several individuals enrolled in the fund. These people nurtured and supported the gift of life made present through pregnant mothers and their babies, and experienced first-hand God’s love through the gift of newborn children.

Founded in 1898 by the Misericordia Sisters, Villa Rosa is a prenatal and postnatal residence in Winnipeg where young women can find shelter during their pregnancies. Villa Rosa serves some of the most vulnerable women in Manitoba, most of whom are single, pregnant teenagers. By offering a safe place to live, nutritious meals, counselling, life skills, education, parenting programs, and unconditional love, staff and volunteers journey with the mothers and their babies to provide a transformative experience — a life-giving alternative to abortion and a foundation for future growth.

For more information, see [www.livingwaterswpg.ca](http://www.livingwaterswpg.ca).

## Benedictine sisters adapting to change

This article first appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press, Nov. 18, 2017.

By Brenda Suderman

WINNIPEG — Roman Catholic sisters known for their hospitality may soon be welcoming hundreds of new neighbours after the sale of a large part of their West St. Paul property to a developer.



PM file

Sister Virginia Evard, OSB

“We’re doing it because we need to do it. We need the funds,” says Sister Virginia Evard, OSB, prioress of St. Benedict’s Monastery.

Last month the sisters announced the sale of 52 unused acres of their 74-acre property at the corner of Main St. and Masters Ave., including some river frontage.

Evard says proceeds from the sale will support the monastery, now home to 17 sisters ranging in age from 57 to 95. Another 20 senior citizens live in St. Benedict’s Place, an independent-living retirement community. The monastery also houses a retreat and conference centre.

“We chose the land we were selling to maintain privacy,” says Evard, adding the monastery campus remains intact, except for the outdoor labyrinth, which has been relocated to the west side of the buildings.

“We know people are probably asking what will happen to the centre,” adds Sister Mary Coswin, OSB, director of the retreat centre. “We are here and we are committed to being here as long as we can.”

Evard declined to provide the sale price, but a municipal official says the land had become more valuable because of infrastructure improvements. The monastery recently decommissioned its outdated waste water treatment plant and connected to the municipal system.

Faced with strong financial reasons to sell, Coswin says the sisters deliberated before making a deal to ensure they were making the right decision for the monastery and the people they serve.

“We tried to hear God say ‘Move on and sell what you don’t need,’ ” Coswin says of the process. “We have one ear listening to what are the needs of people in our area. We still believe we have something to offer in spiritual formation and hospitality.”

She says visitors attending retreats or conferences won’t notice any significant changes inside the buildings, although they might hear noise from heavy equipment if and when construction begins.

“There will definitely be a change (outside),” Coswin says. “There will be construction noise and there will be neighbourhood noise. Inside, it won’t be different.”

That’s welcome news for Wolseley-area spiritual director

Laura Funk, who appreciates both the indoor and outdoor spaces when she visits the monastery for personal renewal or to lead retreats.

“In winter, you cozy up in the little nooks of the monastery, but in summer it’s nice to wander the paths,” Funk says. “Part of St. Benedict’s charm is being out of the city.”

The other attraction is the simple, even austere, atmosphere away from distractions, says Steve Bell, a Winnipeg singer-songwriter who visits the monastery to write and reflect.

“I go there for a cloistered experience and I only leave my room for my meals,” Bell says. “I want the four beige walls with the one Bible verse on the wall and a quiet space, and the ambience of prayer.”

The daily prayers continue, but the land sale signals the Benedictine sisters are adapting to changing circumstances and needs. Originally designed as a private girls school, the sisters closed the school in 1970 and reopened as a retreat and conference centre. In 2006, an unused part of the monastery was converted into seniors’ housing.

“There are more people in our building (now) and in the chapel and in relationships,” Coswin says. “We moved from teaching girls to providing spiritual formation for adults.”

And the lessons of adaptation and transformation they impart in spiritual formation are ones they continue to learn for themselves, Coswin says.

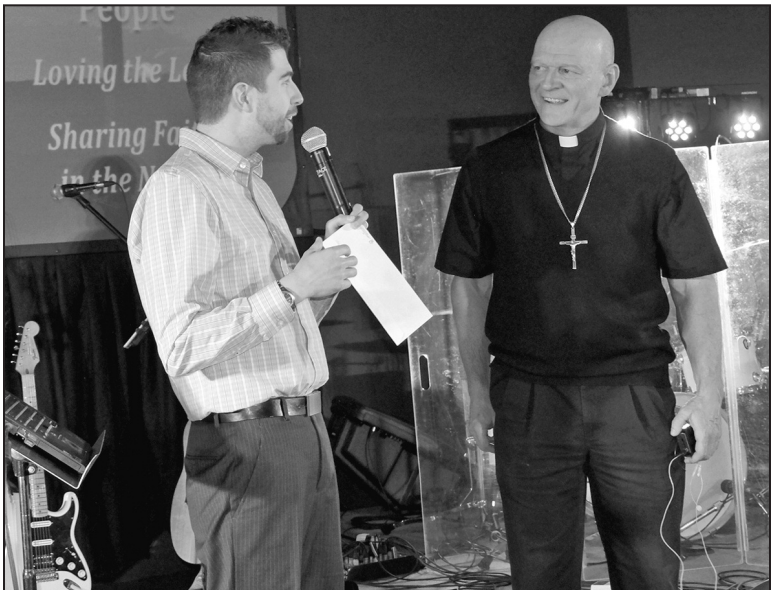
“Change is about the past. Transformation is about the future. It’s about what you’re becoming,” she says. “We hope we’re transforming in the process of changing.”

Evard adds, “Our way of life is about transformation.”



Monique Gauthier

**SOWING SEEDS** — The Sowing Seeds Award, which recognizes a commitment to transform the world through love and sacrifice, this year honoured the work of Villa Rosa, a prenatal and postnatal residence in Winnipeg where young women can find shelter during pregnancy. From left: Monique Gauthier of Living Waters Columbarium; Josie Bartolome and Jerico Acaya, representing legacy families; Kathy Strachan, executive director of Villa Rosa; and Rev. Darrin Gurr, pastor of St. Gianna Beretta Molla Church.



Kiply Yaworski

**FACETOFACE CONFERENCE** — A FacetoFace United Conference Nov. 18 - 19 at the Cathedral of the Holy Family in Saskatoon featured praise and worship music, prayer, testimonies, mass, eucharistic adoration, drama, and a number of speakers. The keynote speaker was FacetoFace Ministries founder Ken Yasinski, with Bishop Mark Hagemoen also addressing the crowd of some 400 youth and adults during the annual event. Formerly bishop of Mackenzie-Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories, and installed as the eighth bishop of Saskatoon four days after the conference, Hagemoen described the impact of youth ministry in the communities of the North.



# Passionate care cannot be provided by one person

By James Buchok

WINNIPEG — Passionate care for the dying and the bereaved can't be provided by just one person, says a hospital spiritual care director, and those providing that care need the help of family, friends and their faith.

"I meditate daily, I pray, I seek out experiences in nature, play music and feel the love from family, friends and co-workers. I cannot provide passionate care alone," said Rick Benson, director of Spiritual and Religious Care and Grief Recovery Specialist at St. Joseph's Hospital in Saint John, N.B. Benson recently published a book about his experiences as a caregiver: *My Chaos: Searching for My New Normal*.

"The title was not chosen to be

catchy or cute," Benson said. "It comes from thousands of interactions I have had with people seeking support. Each word in the title holds significance. 'My' recognizes that people live with their experiences in the deepest part of their being. 'Chaos' most often comes from variables or influences beyond one's control."

In the book, Benson shares evidence-based interventions, stories, and images to help readers cope with loss, grief, and life transitions, something he has done for the past 11 years with patients at St Joseph's Hospital. Benson's hope is to help people cope with life transitions and loss.

"The book is not just for those who have experienced death; it is much broader than that," said Benson. He started the book two

years ago as a handout for patients and families dealing with loss. "The interventions and suggestions and stories help people who are experiencing the loss directly and those who are helping. If you have a cancer or dementia diagnosis your life has changed. If you have a break-up or lose a job, how do you cope?"

Benson attended St. John Brébeuf School and St. Paul's High School in Winnipeg, where he lived out his Jesuit education, receiving the gold medal for leadership in his graduating year, 1975. During high school and after graduation Benson was involved at St. Amant Centre, a resource for Manitobans with developmental disabilities, and the local L'Arche community.

He moved to Atlantic Canada

after spending a few years at L'Arche. He has held various

leadership positions in education and health care, doing his best to follow the principles of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and the Jesuit model of being One for Others.

Benson attended St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S., and in 2015 received the university's Alumni Service Award. He has worked as a youth minister with the Calgary Catholic School Board, served as dean of students at St. Francis Xavier University, and is a former National Co-ordinator/National Chaplain of Canadian Catholic Campus Ministry.

*My Chaos: Searching For My New Normal* was launched in Saint John in October and Benson is planning a Winnipeg launch within the next few months. The book is available from Chapters, Indigo, Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and [rickcbenson.com](http://rickcbenson.com)



Rick Benson

## Berumen puts her faith into action

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

SASKATOON — Helping parishes and other groups navigate the complex process of private refugee sponsorship is the role of Sofia Berumen, the new co-ordinator of the Office of Migration in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon.

It is work pioneered by the late Rev. Paul Donlevy, who established the diocese as a government-recognized Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH), approved to co-ordinate the private sponsorship of refugees. At that

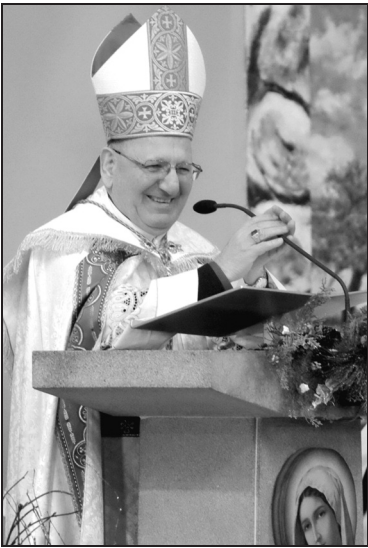
time it was to help those fleeing from war and violence in south-east Asia.

The diocesan Migration Office was later established at the Catholic Pastoral Centre with a legacy from the Donlevy family, and has continued with support from Holy Spirit Parish and the Bishop's Annual Appeal.

Berumen follows in the footsteps of the late Ellen Erickson and former co-ordinator Christine Zyla in reaching out to refugees and those helping them settle in Canada. She is assisted part-time by Robyn Kondratowicz.



Sofia Berumen



Kiply Yaworski

**CHALDEAN PATRIARCH — His Beatitude Louis Raphaël I Sako, the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Babylon and the head of the Chaldean Catholic Church, addresses the congregation of Sacred Heart Chaldean Parish in Saskatoon during a visit Dec. 1. The patriarch celebrated the eucharist with Bishop Bawai Soro, the newly installed bishop of the Chaldean Eparchy of Mar Addai of Toronto (which covers all of Canada); Bishop Emanuel Hanna Shaleta, former eparch of Toronto, now serving as Bishop of St. Peter the Apostle of San Diego, Calif.; Bishop Basel Salim Yaldo, auxiliary eparch of Babylon; and Bishop Bryan Bayda of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Saskatoon. The mass included prayers for persecuted Christians of the Eastern-Rite Chaldean Catholic Church. Following mass, the Chaldean community gathered to share a meal with the bishops at the Cathedral of the Holy Family in Saskatoon.**

Berumen says she is delighted to have an opportunity to put her faith into action in this new role. Extending welcome and support to those who are fleeing danger, persecution, violence, and war is a way of living the Gospel imperative to "welcome the stranger" (Mt 25:35), she says. "As a Catholic, I have a wonderful, warm feeling in seeing how the diocese has established this office and is actively doing this work."

Berumen is familiar with some of the challenges of being a newcomer, and dealing with cross-cultural communication. Originally from Mexico, she studied communication with a specialty in education at Iteso University in the city of Tlaquepaque. Later she went to Barcelona, Spain, for post-graduate studies in cultural management and culture policies, and then to Toulouse, France, for hands-on language and cultural studies.

"I have worked in two main areas: co-ordinating communication (mainly for the cultural sector, non-profits, community services), and as a university lecturer (teaching communication theory, cultural studies or written communication)."

When Berumen came to Canada in 2014, she worked with the Open Door Society as an interpreter. "That is when I began to learn more about the refugee issue, to understand the problems and challenges they face."

Co-ordinating the Office of Migration is a way of bringing all that experience to bear, and of serving as a bridge for newcomers.

Private refugee sponsorship is a complex undertaking, with

many policies and forms to navigate. It is a long, arduous process, and it can take years. The need is enormous and resources are limited, and it can be heartbreaking at times when the office is not able to help someone, Berumen adds.

Once a refugee family arrives, the sponsoring parish or group is committed to meeting its needs for at least a year — financially, medically, socially, and emotionally.

"There are many areas where a volunteer can help," says Berumen, noting that she hopes to encourage more volunteers to get involved. In doing so, it is vital to provide support, training, and resources.

Sponsorship committees in the Diocese of Saskatoon have done amazing work over the years, says Berumen. Sharing that expertise with others who are just getting started in the process, and bringing in protocols and support that will help all sponsorship groups with complex challenges is a priority for the new co-ordinator.

Her ideas include recruiting a group of volunteers with expertise in particular areas, whom sponsoring groups could consult when needed. This might include nurses, doctors, counsellors or lawyers, she suggests. "Sometimes we are not ready to face people with stress or trauma. We are not counsellors, but we can get help to identify those cases and refer them properly."

Plans to clarify roles and expectations will be helpful for both sponsoring groups and newcomers. Developing guidelines and protocols can assist in making the experience a positive one for everyone.

## Universal Church Supplies run as a ministry

By Kate O’Gorman

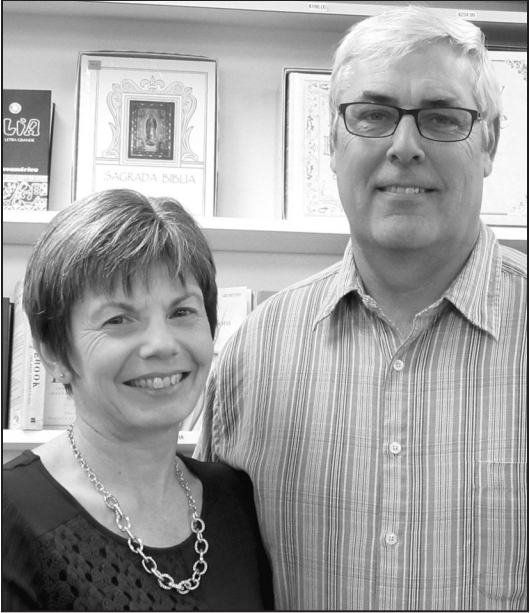
SASKATOON — With a mission to provide trusted, biblically based resources and products that help individuals to know, love, and serve God, Universal Church Supplies in Saskatoon has been owned and operated by Gerry and Lisa Holst for 20 years.

The Holsts opened the doors to their retail venture at the urging of Lisa's aunt and uncle, who own a

Catholic and ecumenical communities, owning and operating the store has strengthened their marriage.

"It's nice getting to work together," said Lisa. "We each bring different gifts and strengths to the business. We work well collaboratively."

As business owners, the couple have noticed trends and experienced industry challenges over the years.



Kate O’Gorman

Lisa and Gerry Holst

sister store in Edmonton and mentored them along the way.

"It's not something we ever expected to do," said Lisa. Gerry was in the printing business at the time, and Lisa was a former teacher and stay-at-home mother. "Neither of us had any retail experience, so it was a big change."

With encouragement from family and recognizing that the store would be filling a need in the community, the Holsts stepped out in faith. "When the opportunity came, we were ready for it," said the couple.

While the primary focus of Universal Church Supplies is to serve the Catholic community in and around Saskatoon, the reach of the store is broader than that.

"We serve all churches with liturgical needs," Lisa explained. "The store is ecumenical. We carry things for all Christian communities."

Through their interactions with customers, the couple have learned the nuances that exist among different denominations.

"I think we've become sensitive to the different worship styles of various faith traditions," said Gerry. "We try to provide everyone with what they need."

Beyond the opportunity to become immersed in the wider

"Online shopping has affected us," Lisa noted, "but I think the advantage of (the store) is that people can come in, hold a book, and look at it before they make a purchase."

The Holsts take special care to make the atmosphere of the store one of peace and welcome.

"We see it as a ministry," she continued. "When people come into the store, we try to help them find what they need to grow and explore their faith. It's a blessing to walk with people as they journey."

"As a local business, we really appreciate the support from all our customers and the churches," said Gerry. "We are here to be a resource and we welcome the opportunity to serve."

For more information, see [www.ucssask.com](http://www.ucssask.com).



# Plantation workers in India a ‘forgotten community’

By Jean Ko Din  
The Catholic Register

TORONTO (CCN) — The plight of workers on India’s tea estates will not go unnoticed by the rest of the world if Jesuit Father Lalit Tirkey has his way.

Tirkey has just finished a month-long visit to educate Canadians about how his mission work is supporting tea plantation workers in the Indian region of Darjeeling, where he says workers’ rights are being violated.

Tirkey is director of the Human Life Development Research Centre (HLDRC), a community development centre managed by the Jesuits in North Bengal. The centre provides advocacy seminars and leadership training to empower vulnerable groups in the tea plantations.

“This is the forgotten community,” he told a crowd of 50 people at Mary Ward Centre Nov. 28. “The backbone of this tea industry is still one of the poorest people of the society.”

About 1.13 million people live and work in the tea estates of northern West Bengal, most of which are spread across the Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling regions.

“At any given time there are about 2,000 to 3,000 people working in one tea estate,” said Tirkey, who has delivered his message at schools and parishes

across the country. “The labourers are completely dependent on the estate management for work, wages, medical supplies, housing, even water and electricity.”

He said that owners of these estates have been known to say that cash wages of about 120 rupees for eight hours of work (or \$2.40 Canadian dollars) are justified for what they spend on housing and medical facilities, as required by the Plantation Labour Act of 1951.

However, Tirkey said that financial mismanagement has left housing and medical facilities in shambles. “In India, I would say, there is general apathy to what happens to this sector.”

Only two permanent labourers per household are permitted to work on the estates. They can be joined by “casual labourers” who pick up work during the peak harvest months of March to September. This limits the income families are able to earn and many face starvation. Children are forced to drop out of school to earn extra money.

Because these estates are far from urban areas, there are no alternative industries to absorb job losses when a tea garden closes down.

“After over 60 years in existence, they do not own their land,” said Tirkey. “Today we call them ‘landless labourers’ and we’re appealing to the govern-

ment to give them at least their homestead.”

The HLDRC was established on July 31, 2013. It began by talking with communities and establishing leaders to speak about their needs. Almost immediately, Tirkey said, people in the community flocked to meet with him and his fellow mission workers.

“There was a lot of hope in these first meetings because they have had a lot of groups come and go, but we were there and I said, ‘We will be part of your lives,’” said Tirkey.

In four years, the HLDRC has established regular forums for community members to speak about their concerns and their priorities.

Skills development courses for English language, basic computer skills, tailoring, weaving and even livestock rearing are giving people more opportunities to find work outside the plantations.

The HLDRC also provides people with legal aid, pension plans and student scholarships.

Last year, the centre launched an anti-human trafficking campaign to educate communities after an influx of closed tea gardens left girls and women vulnerable to be lured by traffickers masquerading as “job agents.”

“To achieve the goals we have for these communities, we need to have partnerships. We have

about a dozen of them,” said Tirkey. “One of the main reasons for this trip is to come and thank the people and all those who have done great work for our place.”

Tirkey’s series of presentations is part of the Canadian Jesuits International’s Tell Ten campaign, which encourages supporters to raise awareness about

livelihood support for the poor.

The campaign is focused on three partner projects: Tirkey’s HLDRC centre in Darjeeling, the Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre in Zambia and Comparte social organization in Latin America.

For more information, visit <http://www.canadianjesuitsinternational.ca>



Tessa Petruic

## Palliative care does not mean giving up

Continued from page 4

One of the biggest misconceptions is that accessing palliative care means giving up on recovering, said Fassbender, citing a 2010 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. The study found that after a cancer diagnosis, people who have monthly visits with a palliative care doctor or nurse while taking the usual treatment, live three months longer than those who do not have a palliative care visit.

“Palliative care alongside active treatment not only improves quality of life but also quantity of life,” he said.

While Margie’s experience exemplifies the benefits of palliative care, many dying Canadians are not so fortunate.

Only 58 per cent of Canadians are aware of what palliative care is, according to a 2016 report from global market research firm Ipsos. Only a third of patients who die in Canada access specialized palliative care, according to the Palliative Institute.

“What’s the best thing that we could do today to make the world a better place? It isn’t to talk about Margie, because her care was good,” said Fassbender. “But what about all the people that are dying at home that no one knows about? What about the homeless people that are dying in the emergency room? And so what we as a society need to do is to educate on what is palliative care.”

The philosophy of palliative care should be encompassed by everyone in the health care system, said Fassbender, including the home care nurse, family doc-

tor, oncologist, cardiologist, and nephrologist.

“Everyone should have a basic knowledge of palliative care, because very often in the medical system when the doctors, the surgeons, are focused on improving your quantity of life, they forget about the rest of the patient,” said Fassbender. “So they sew them up and the anaesthesiologist sticks around long enough that there’s no side-effects, the nurse says make sure there’s no infection of the wound, and we send the person home.

“As a family member, you’re sitting at home saying, ‘Please, Mom is still in pain. Is that normal?’ Or she’s tired, she’s fatigued, she can’t participate in her usual activities. So what is an acceptable amount of suffering?”

Medical assistance in dying, the legal term for physician-assisted death, is not palliative care, said Fassbender. In fact, it actually increases suffering.

“Imagine that your loved one — maybe your mom, dad, grandfather — is suffering and they require care, time, and help. Now they’re going, ‘There’s medical assistance in dying, if I do that I’m going to be able to pass on more money to you, I’m going to be less of a burden.’ Do we really want people to think about that? It’s awful we’re giving them a choice now that they didn’t have before.”

“When symptoms are looked after, people are able to participate meaningfully and find meaning in life.”

Margo and Carolynn learned a great deal about palliative care from the hospital. In their mother’s case, it meant seeking a bal-

ance between controlling pain and maintaining lucidity.

“There are so many final conversations to have when you’re dying,” said Carolynn. “So many hands to hold. For Mom, so many blessings to give.



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# In Nova Scotia, cemeteries tell 100-year-old story

By Francis Campbell

HALIFAX (CNS) — The tall, grey and weathered headstone in Mount Olivet Catholic Cemetery is carved with 11 names, all from the same family, and with a simple statement at the bottom: “They died Dec. 6, 1917, at 66 Veith St.”

One hundred years later, the tombstone in the west end of Halifax is a stark reminder of the catastrophic Halifax Explosion that killed 2,000 and injured 9,000 more.

Under the name of the family’s father, Joseph D. Hinch, 50, is the list of his 10 children and their ages, from 19 to two — Clara, Helena, Thomas, Mary, Joseph, James, Annie, Margaret, Ralph and Helen.

All were caught in the a 326-acre area around Halifax’s north end that was torn by the destructive force of the blast, just after 9 a.m. Fires ignited and hundreds of buildings were flattened or damaged, including the Catholic church the Hinch family attended, St. Joseph’s, not far from the harbour.

“Every single church in the area was damaged, all the way out to Windsor Junction (33 km from downtown Halifax),” said Blair Beed, a local historian and author

*Campbell is a stringer for the Catholic Register.*

of a book on the explosion. “Churches of all denominations,” Beed said. “Four churches were destroyed. The Methodist, the Presbyterian, the Anglican and the Catholic churches in that neighbourhood. Every other church, Catholic and non-Catholic, and the synagogues downtown were damaged in some way. Some of them were so damaged, like St. John’s Presbyterian on Brunswick, it was torn down and they moved to another location to rebuild.”

The explosion was ignited after the French ship Mont Blanc, carrying 2,500 tons of high explosives and a deck-load of monochlorobenzene, collided with the Imo, a Norwegian vessel, in what is known as the narrows, a strait that connects the Halifax Harbour to Bedford Basin. It was the world’s largest human-made explosion before nuclear weapons. The blast took its greatest toll in the Richmond district of Halifax, where St. Joseph’s was located.

“Fifty per cent of Halifax was Roman Catholic,” Beed said. “Fifty per cent, like it is now, but they don’t go to church now.”

Halifax and the city of Dartmouth, across the harbour, had a combined population of about 65,000 at the time. About 1,500 of those were parishioners at St. Joseph’s. More than a quarter of them died that Thursday morning. “Four hundred and four people



Francis Campbell, The Catholic Register

**HALIFAX EXPLOSION — Joe McSweeney, a retired teacher who has an affinity for history and for exploring cemeteries, stands next to the Mount Olivet Catholic Cemetery gravesite of Vince Coleman in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Coleman was killed in the Halifax Explosion in 1917 that claimed the lives of 2,000 and injured 9,000 more.**

of that congregation were killed,” Beed said. “They lived and worked there. Back in those days, transportation was tough so you lived where you worked.

“There were a lot of big families there.”

The Hinch gravesite, a pronounced example of the carnage reaped by the blast, has a bright yellow stake nearby. There are nearly 400 of the yellow stakes at Mount Olivet and the Holy Cross cemetery, a Catholic cemetery in the downtown area. The yellow stakes were authorized by the city’s Catholic Cemeteries Commission, painted and put in place by a summer student in advance of the 100th anniversary of the explosion. Each stake represents a Catholic killed in the blast.

“The whole story of the Halifax Explosion could be attached to graves and gravesites at Mount Olivet Cemetery,” said Joe McSweeney, a retired teacher who has an affinity for history and for exploring cemeteries.

Aside from the Hinch family stone, McSweeney said there are more than 330 Catholic victims of the explosion buried at Mount Olivet. One of those is the gravesite of Vince Coleman, the train dispatcher immortalized for his bravery in staying at his post to warn an incoming train of the pending dan-

ger. Coleman died in the explosion as did his office manager, William Lovett, and his stenographer, Florence Young. They, too, are buried at Mount Olivet.

McSweeney said 10 firefighters answered the call to tackle the fire on the Mont Blanc, before the fire turned into an explosion. All 10 were Catholic, nine were killed and eight bodies recovered. The one firefighter who survived was William (Billy) Wells, who was thrown from the driver’s seat of the firetruck.

Explosion victims are interred at cemeteries across Nova Scotia, and even beyond.

“There were 50 different cemeteries across Nova Scotia that bodies were sent to,” Beed said. “It was wartime so a lot of people in the city were from the rural area working in the war industries and when they died, they simply were sent back to their home community to be buried in the family plot.

“One Catholic soldier was sent home to Levis, Quebec. It really was a national event.”

## Reprogram prejudices

Continued from page 3

whenever people believe their identity is at stake.

“The commandment that is most repeated in the Old Testament is ‘love the stranger.’ So in the oldest book that is the basis of many religions, we are commanded to not be prejudiced. We are commanded to love the stranger,” Divinsky said.

When it comes to the violence and hatred directed at gays, reli-

gions need to carefully examine what they teach and how they teach it, said Divinsky.

“Bodies of religious doctrine absolutely create an us-versus-them,” she said.

Respect and tolerance are clearly part of what’s taught about religion and other issues in Catholic schools, but the challenge is in reprogramming the prejudices people pick up in their families, MacDonald said.

*“So the shepherd went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.”*  
Luke 2:16

**Let us celebrate with them in the Spirit of the Newborn Child, with hope, love, and mercy!**

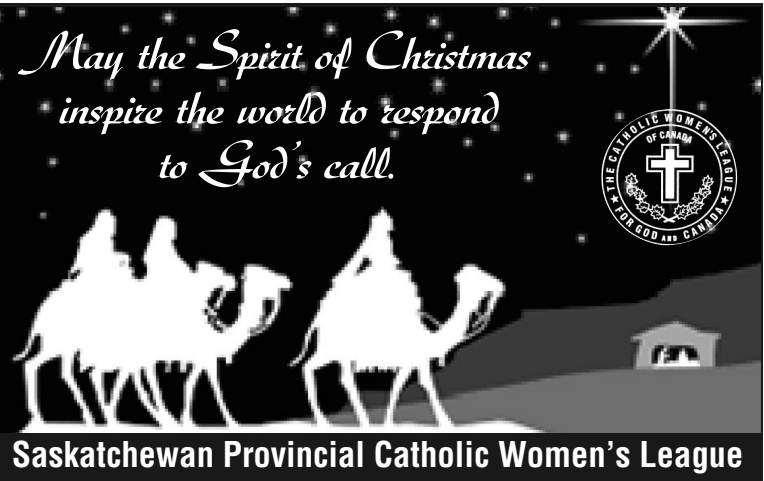


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# Actor draws on her faith to give voice to a mouse

By Emily McFarlan Miller  
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Actor Kristin Chenoweth never really had thought about what the animals in the Christmas story must have felt, she said.

They’ve always been there — in the text of Luke’s Gospel, in carols like “Away in a Manger” and “The Friendly Beasts,” and in Nativity sets brought down from the attic every December.

But she said she only needed to look as far as her own dog, Thunder, to understand why the producers of *The Star* decided to make a movie of the first Christmas from the vantage point of four-legged creatures. Thunder “knows what kind of day I’m having, right? He knows if it’s a good day or a bad day, and those animals did, too.”

Chenoweth gives voice to a mouse named Abby in the animated retelling of Jesus’ birth in theatres this holiday season.

*The Star* connected with her own faith, she said. Chenoweth grew up in a Southern Baptist church and now identifies as a “non-denominational” Christian who is “accepting of everyone.”

“When I heard the story, what it was, (I thought) this is what I believe. I do believe in the birth of Christ and who he was when he walked the earth, so, yeah, this is something that is easy for me to do.”

*The Star* has been in the Top 10 at the box office since it



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**THE STAR** — Joseph (voiced by Zachary Levi), Mary (Gina Rodriguez), Bo the donkey (Steven Yeun), Dave the dove (Keegan-Michael Key) and Ruth the sheep (Aidy Bryant) journey to Bethlehem in *The Star*. Kristin Chenoweth gives voice to a mouse named Abby in the animated retelling of Jesus’ birth.

opened the weekend of Nov. 18, according to Box Office Mojo.

The animated movie stars Steven Yeun as the voice of Mary and Joseph’s donkey Bo; Oprah Winfrey, Tyler Perry and Tracy Morgan as the wise men’s three camels Deborah, Cyrus and Felix; and Aidy Bryant as Ruth, part of the flock shepherds watched by night. Everyone from Lakewood Church pastor Joel Osteen to Mariah Carey is credited with

cameos in the film.

Chenoweth’s Abby overhears the angel’s announcement to Mary that she miraculously will give birth to Jesus, then rushes to tell every other animal she meets. She loves the character’s “positive voice,” and while no mice are named in scriptural accounts of Jesus’ birth, she joked there always has to be a mouse running around somewhere unseen.

What drew Chenoweth to the

project was the opportunity to tell a familiar story from a new viewpoint, not unlike the hit Broadway musical *Wicked*, a retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* in which she originated the role of the good witch Glinda, but which is written from the perspective of the “wicked” witch.

Presenting the story from the animals’ perspective helped the producers grapple with a challenge for anyone who tries to tell the story of Christ’s birth: How much creative licence can one take with a story central to the beliefs of more than two billion

people around the world?

The Bible doesn’t give many details about the creatures that might have been present at Christ’s birth other than mentioning the shepherd’s flocks.

“Doing this from a fresh perspective, I think, makes it new for everybody and can call our attention to really the craziness of all of this — that God chose to come, the king of the universe, born to peasants, born among the ani-

mals,” said director Tim Reckart.

Their Christian faith is one thing that attracted both Reckart and the film’s producer, DeVon Franklin, to the film.

They consulted many pastors and other religious leaders on the script to make sure it accurately portrayed details of the Christmas story found in Scripture, said Franklin, who previously produced *Miracles From Heaven*.

They also went to great lengths to make sure the human characters’ Middle Eastern ethnicity and Jewish faith were accurately reflected in their appearances, according to Franklin.

“In other iterations of the story, it may not have been paying as close of attention to it, but for us, it was important and very close to our hearts,” he said.

In the end, Franklin said, he hopes the result fills a gap in the holiday movie genre — a Christmas movie that actually tells the story of the first Christmas, not of grinchers, misers and down-on-their-luck businessmen — and in faith-based films in general — a major animated film.

Chenoweth predicts audiences of all ages and faiths will relate to *The Star*.

“Because it’s about love and it’s about family,” she said. “That’s the basis of any religion. It’s love one another, feed the poor, help each other — that’s really where God is, no matter what he or she looks like to people.”

## O come, O come, Emmanuel, by candlelight, when no one is listening

By Caitlin Ward

So I bought an Advent wreath.

It doesn’t really resemble the Advent wreath I grew up with. It’s tiny, for one — fewer than six inches across, I’d guess. It matches my tiny Peruvian Nativity set in size, if not style. My Advent wreath relies on having tiny pink and purple candles to go inside it, which I know is going to be a headache next year.

### O come, O come, Emmanuel

(Latin text is first documented in Germany in 1710; the tune most familiar in the English-speaking world has its origins in 15th-century France.)

This is not how I was raised. My inventive and deeply sensible mother crafted a beautiful, ornate Advent wreath out of bits and pieces, and bought purple and pink ribbons for our family wreath so she could buy white or wax candles instead of having to hunt down liturgically correct colours every year.

It was long overdue. I’ve

Ward is a Saskatoon-based freelance writer who spends her days (and most nights) working at a small Catholic college. Her less eloquent thoughts can be found at [www.twitter.com/newsetofstrings](http://www.twitter.com/newsetofstrings)

been living on my own for years, now. When I lived with my sister I relied on her Advent wreath which, like my parents’, was an ingenious and sensible thing that could easily be used every year with a minimum of fuss. When I moved out on my own, too busy and distracted to make a wreath for the Advent season, I gave up having one entirely. It wasn’t a choice, per se. It was just that it didn’t occur to me to buy one, and then I got used to not having one, and that was seven years ago. For similar reasons, I’ve never had a Christmas tree in my apartment, and the Nativity set is a relatively new addition to my home, as well. It was only when I bought a Nativity set for a friend who is in the process of converting that I realized I really ought to have one too.

For a Catholic, I am often terrible at ritual and observance. There are certain saints I like and admire, but I’ve never developed a proper devotion to one. Half the time I forget to genuflect because I’m late for mass and just trying to get into a pew before someone sees me. I am very lucky to work at a Catholic college because I’m not sure I’d fulfil my obligation for reconciliation if I

didn’t happen to work with three priests.

I go for sudden bursts of formal prayer if I’m doing a novena for a particular reason, and I’ve a great deal of gratitude for the rosary, which has got me through some tough times. This past summer my sister, brother-in-law, and I went on a road trip to look at different Marian shrines in Saskatchewan, so on one particular day I did the Stations of the Cross two times in a row.

If I’m honest, though, most of my prayer life revolves around informally chatting with God while I’m driving, apologizing to him somewhat randomly if I

O come, O come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear  
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan’s tyranny  
From depths of Hell Thy people save  
And give them victory o’er the grave  
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, o Israel

O come, Thou Day-Spring  
Come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine advent here  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death’s dark shadows put to flight  
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, o Israel

(there are two more verses)

think I’m doing a crappy thing, or looking up at the sky at night, demanding to know why something is the way it is. I also ask St. Anthony to tell God I need my keys, a lot. That last one is not original with me, but something I lifted from an early George Carlin bit. Unlike Carlin, my

Catholicism has not lapsed, but like Carlin, I lose my keys a lot.

Of course, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with these expressions of prayer; a less formal relationship with the Divine is an important aspect of one’s faith. If we relegate our prayer and thoughts of God only to these more formal things, it becomes easy to leave Jesus at the tabernacle, or at the crucifix hanging on our wall, rather than recognizing God in all things and all people, and our lives need to be guided by God in every moment, not just in our formal observance.

I think, though, that holistic view needs to include formal observance in a way I have tended not to include it throughout my life. I have relied on my parents,

or my sister, and in some cases my friends, to keep me committed



Caitlin Ward

to them. Before this year I didn’t think there was much point in having an Advent wreath if I was the only one who was going to see or use it. But there is something good about setting aside time for formal prayer, instead of doing it piecemeal throughout the week. There is something helpful in devoting oneself to a particular saint to learn from that saint’s life and writings, and to ask for intercession from someone more holy than oneself.

And for me, this year, there has been something beautiful in having my tiny Advent wreath on my coffee table, lighting the candle for myself, and singing “O come, O come, Emmanuel” on Sunday night, even though no one is there to hear it but me and God.



# Finding Love’s light amid the world’s noisy darkness

## Screenings & Meanings

Gerald Schmitz



Once again the “Christmas movie” season started many weeks ago with the Nov. 1 release of *A Bad Moms Christmas*. More like a bad Halloween joke. Like early Santa Claus parades, the theme can become tiresome even before the calendar turns to December.

Appearing in two other November Yuletide movies is tireless Canadian thespian 87-year-old Christopher Plummer. He’s the voice of King Herod in the animated feature *The Star* (see story, page 10), about a brave donkey named Bo who with a

### First Reformed (U.S. 2017)

gaggle of animal companions plays an important role in the first Christmas.

Plummer plays Ebenezer Scrooge in Bharat Nalluri’s *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, which purports to tell the story of how Charles Dickens came up with his classic story A Christmas Carol.

A third helping of Plummer is in the offing before year’s end in Ridley Scott’s *All the Money in the World* as the hard-hearted billionaire J. Paul Getty. That came about as a result of the tsunami of post-Weinstein sexual harassment and assault allegations taking down Kevin Spacey, who had already appeared in theatrical trailers for the movie. Damage control quickly kicked in with Scott reshooting the scenes of Getty with Plummer (30 years Spacey’s senior) in the role. ’Tis the season to be jolly indeed.

One can take solace in some of the perennial classics that regularly show up on television during the Christmas season. I’m thinking of the incomparable Jimmy Stewart in Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* from 1946 with the angel “Clarence,” who has yet to earn his wings, yet saves the Stewart character from suicidal despair. Memories were still fresh

of the Second World War in which Stewart had been a decorated fighter pilot. A lot of anguished souls needed healing.

Less well-known is Stewart’s role opposite Claudette Colbert in *It’s a Wonderful World* from 1939, playing a private eye who gets caught up in the case of a man framed for murder, though justice prevails in the end. The movie manages to be a light-hearted affair in the year, often considered Hollywood’s greatest, that would see the start of the most deadly war in human history.

It seems to me that in our lives and in our world we could use something truly wonderful to lift up spirits. That is the gift of Christmas that keeps on giving — of God’s light shining in the darkness, made manifest in the birth of Christ as the light of the world. Christmas is a call to people of goodwill to be the light through all times, and especially when surrounded by the world’s noisy darkness.

So I want to discuss a movie that goes to that deeper challenge of faith beyond any superficial seasonal trappings of comfort and joy.

That film is Paul Schrader’s *First Reformed*, which premiered at the Venice film festival and was also shown at the Toronto film festival. It’s a profoundly introspective and insightful work that relates to existential crises of the current global situation and of personal faith and conscience.

Schrader had a strict upbringing in the Calvinist Christian Reformed Church and studied theology in a Christian college before going on to study film at the University of Southern California. A protégé of legendary *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael, he started his career as a critic. In 1972 his *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* was published by the UCLA press. Japanese master Ozu found transcendence in everyday family relations, as in the classic *Tokyo Story* (1953). Danish director Carl Dreyer is



**FIRST REFORMED** — In *First Reformed*, Ethan Hawke plays an ex-military chaplain who, after losing his son, befriends a woman (Amanda Seyfried) also suffering from the loss of her husband.

best known for *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928); France’s Robert Bresson for *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), which finds echoes in *First Reformed*. Schrader went on to leave his mark as a screenwriter — famously collaborating with Martin Scorsese including on *The Last Temptation of Christ* — and as a filmmaker in his own right.

The central figure in *First Reformed* is an Episcopalian pastor, Rev. Toller (an extraordinary performance by Ethan Hawke), whose first assignment from his bishop, an African-American named Jeffers, is to minister to the dwindling congregation of a historic First Reformed church in rural New York State that once served as a sanctuary along the “underground railroad” route of slaves escaping to Canada.

Approaching a 250-year anniversary, it is regarded as a marginal “tourist church.” Toller’s mission, in fact, is a temporary transitional one: to prepare the valuable church property for sale. The bishop is played by Cedric Kyles, who goes by “the Entertainer,” which seems appropriate as his character is in charge of the prosperous, thriving, “Abundant Life” megachurch with a fancy choir and all the accoutrements of evangelical success. Meanwhile, Toller is tasked with delivering the bad news to the First Reformed faithful few.

Toller, aged 46, is a former

military chaplain who has endured many dark nights of the soul since the loss of his son in the Iraq war and the breakup of his marriage. Alcohol only dulls the pain. He is a broken man grasping for the light of faith, for personal redemption.

Like Bresson’s country priest, he starts confiding his thoughts to a diary. He will do so for a year, then destroy it. He puts up a brave front and tries to maintain an outward calm even as some longtime parishioners, fiercely loyal to their little church, are suspicious of what is in store. Then an encounter with a parishioner leads to a catharsis that changes everything.

Mary (Amanda Seyfried), deeply troubled for her husband, Michael, a militant environmental activist who has returned from the frontlines of a protest in northern Canada, comes to see Toller. Mary’s husband is also involved with a local group fighting a petroleum development project over fears of contamination. The corporate CEO pushing it, Edward Balq (Michael Gaston), is a major donor to the Abundant Life church.

Mary is pregnant, but Michael does not want her to have the child because he despairs of the dire state of the planet. She has further reason to worry he may be driven to extremes. Toller agrees to meet with Michael during which they have a sobering conversation about the harms that humanity has inflicted on God’s creation, the nature of faith, and human responsibility.

the fulcrum that transforms Toller’s story? Because Schrader sees it as a fundamental existential moral question in terms of both collective and individual choice. In another interview he explains that “climate change has put so many of the historic and theological issues into boldface. . . . I’ve lived in the magic cone of history, the best era of history, the most selfish, most indulgent, privileged, laziest of human history that has ever existed. And in return for all this beneficence, we have in turn ruined the planet.”

Toller is shaken into taking a stand. He becomes a true pastor for his flock, determined to keep their church. He faces off against the dubious ethics of the megachurch’s corporate benefactor. He emerges from a self-absorbed solitude to draw close to Mary, and they cling to each other for mutual support after shocking events. There is a wondrous sequence in which they imagine taking a soulful planetary journey.

Coming to the 250th anniversary celebration that the church hierarchy has planned to take place in *First Reformed*, and at which the CEO will be a front-row guest, Mary dissuades an agonizing Toller from resorting to a radically destructive act. In suffering through a kind of passion, he experiences a spiritual rebirth that is underscored through a rendition of the hymn “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.”

Finding faith through such human connections, Schrader seems to suggest, is the saving grace when we feel overwhelmed by the world’s darkness. We need to find the light within ourselves and others if we are to have any hope of a better world. To me, that is a Christmas story for any season.

**In theatres now:**

For family viewing over the holiday season there is Disney Pixar’s newest animated feature *Coco*. The Mexican-themed story, which centres on a little boy, Miguel, and someone’s daughter, named Coco, is richly layered. The superb intricate animation is the year’s best and should be an Oscar favourite. Highly recommended.



And the Word was made flesh,  
He lived among us  
And we saw his glory, the glory that is his  
As the only Son of the Father,  
Full of grace and truth.  
~ John 1:14

Merry Christmas &  
Happy New Year



Archbishop Donald Bolen & Priests,  
Deacons & Faithful of the  
Archdiocese of Regina



# In Incarnation, human history finds deepest meaning

By Jem Sullivan

“Jesus was born in a humble stable, into a poor family. Simple shepherds were the first witnesses to this event. In this poverty heaven’s glory was made manifest. The church never tires of singing the glory of this night.”

These words from the Catechism of the Catholic Church (No. 525) focus our gaze on the mystery of that holy night when Advent preparations culminate in the great Christmas feast.

Inviting wonder before the Incarnation is an exquisite altarpiece panel titled, “The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel.” This early 14th-century masterpiece, attributed to Duccio di Buoninsegna, is a stirring visual homily on the Christmas story.

Completed by Duccio between 1308 and 1311, this panel was once part of one of the most important treasures of western painting: the impressive Maesta altarpiece that visually dominated Siena’s

*Sullivan, author and educator, is secretary for education in the Archdiocese of Washington. She formerly served as docent at the National Gallery of Art in Washington where she led public tours of the masterpiece collection.*



CNS/courtesy National Gallery of Art

**FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE —** This is an image of the early 14th-century masterpiece “The Nativity with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel,” attributed to Duccio di Buoninsegna, part of the Andrew W. Mellon Collection. Each of Duccio’s figures in his luminous Nativity scene radiates faith, hope and love in the presence of the newborn Jesus.

cathedral for two centuries. It is now exhibited at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

On completing the commission in 1311, Duccio became known for his fervent prayer to the mother of God, asking Mary to be the cause of peace for Siena.

Duccio sets the birth of Jesus within salvation history by framing the sacred moment with two prophets who announce the com-

ing Messiah. The longings of Israel for salvation, echoed in our own Advent hopes, are now fulfilled perfectly in this time of grace.

For God extends definitively God’s hand of divine mercy by sending his own son into the world. In the Incarnation, human history finds its deepest meaning and destiny.

On the right stands the prophet Ezekiel with scroll in hand fore-

shadowing the future birth of a saviour. On the left stands Isaiah, with his prophetic words also in hand: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign; the young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel” (Is 7:14).

At the centre of the composition is the virgin mother of God, with her newborn divine son. Her scale is twice that of any figure in the scene, highlighting her unique role in the divine plan of salvation.

Mary is dressed in red and blue garments, colours that point to her son’s divinity and humanity united in his divine person. She gathers her blue robe around her while reclining on a red cushion as she looks with motherly love at her newborn son, Jesus. Mary’s large scale and her recumbent pose evoke traditional icons of the Nativity.

Both mother and child are enclosed in a cave, an element drawn from Eastern iconography.

The only hospitality the world offers is a bare, cold cave, warmed simply by the breath of animals who watch over them. One can feel the spiritual warmth of this holy scene despite the harsh coldness of its material poverty.

Below, Duccio includes two midwives who wash the infant Jesus, lending another ordinary human touch to this extraordinary heavenly moment.

Sitting close to Mary is St. Joseph. To this saintly guardian of the Redeemer was given the singular blessing of being in closest proximity to the mystery of Christ’s birth. So Duccio places Joseph close to Mary, deep in wonder and awe as he ponders God’s marvellous work.

On the cave rooftop an exuberant host of angels gather around the virgin mother and child. Some angels raise their eyes to heaven with joyful melodies of praise to God. Other angels lean over the roof curiously, straining to catch a glimpse of the divine child. Still other angels announce to the simple shepherds the good news of salvation now at hand.

God’s desire for friendship with humanity is fulfilled perfectly in the birth of Jesus. In the face of this greatest of divine gifts, the Incarnation, what is the most fitting human response?

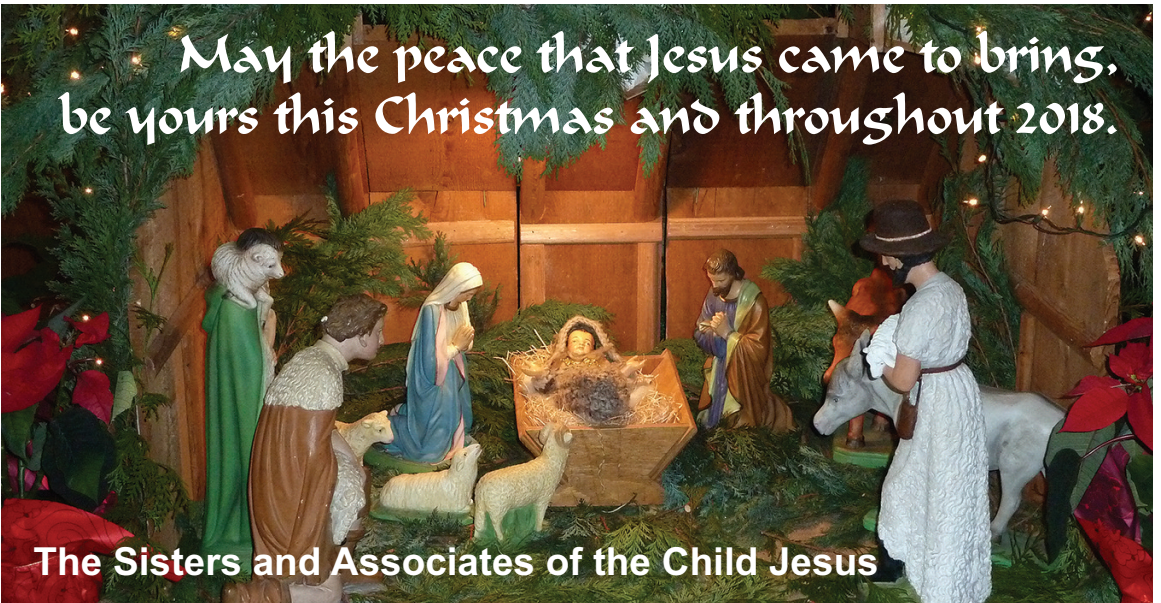
Each of Duccio’s figures in his luminous Nativity scene radiates faith, hope and love in the presence of the newborn Jesus. God takes human flesh in his son Jesus so that, in him, we might be clothed once again with the dignity of the children of God.

For this marvellous exchange made possible by the Incarnation of God, our fitting response is to join the chorus of Duccio’s angels in a hymn of Christmas praise — “O come, let us adore him, Christ, the Lord!”



Angelique Gosselin

**GLORY OF GOD —** “The city had no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb. The nations shall walk by its light; to it the kings of the earth shall bring their treasures.” — Revelation 21:23-24. (Angelique Gosselin is a Grade 6 student at Ecole St. Margaret in Moose Jaw, Sask., Holy Trinity Catholic School Division.)



The *Prairie Messenger* is grateful to the Holy Trinity Catholic School Division in Moose Jaw, Sask., for providing us with the beautiful Christmas artwork found in our Christmas issue.

This is a special Christmas for the *Prairie Messenger* and St. Peter’s Press. It marks the last time we as a staff, with the monks, will celebrate together.

We have been greatly blessed with support, generosity, and love from our readers over these many years. Those gifts have been our daily miracles, without which we could not have survived. We have received them with humble gratitude.

Author John Shea in *Starlight* says, “Miracles are just people and events that trigger our love and so allow us to see the world properly. Where there is love, there is sight.”

May the radiance of the Prince of Peace shine in your hearts this Christmas.



# Birth: joy in the moment, and for the long term

By Gerry Turcotte

*He has given us a new birth into a living hope. — 1 Peter 1.3*

Many years ago, when I lived in Australia, I was excitedly preparing for a return home for Christmas. As an only child of parents who were struggling financially, I had managed somehow to choose what seemed to be the furthest place in the world to live. The cost of travel was prohibitive, so the December trip was a big deal, and the chance to catch up with my folks, who were my best friends in all the world, was truly special. A week before I was scheduled to fly home, however, I received a frantic call from my mother. “You need to come home now,” she sobbed, “your father’s had a heart attack.”

There is perhaps little need to explain how nearly impossible it was to change my flights at that time of year, the complexity of leaving my classes early, or the horrific journey that unfolded at a time when direct flights from Australia to Eastern Canada were non-existent. Suffice to say that my trip home required four separate flights, coincided with one of the worst snowstorms in Toronto’s history that grounded all planes,

*Turcotte is president of St. Mary’s University in Calgary.*

and necessitated my hiring a courier service to “ship” me from Toronto to Montreal. When the 401 was closed down I convinced the driver to let me take over the vehicle, and we wound our way through back roads, dodging roadblocks and police. I arrived, after a 56-hour journey, to discover my father on life support. He never recovered, and I was never able to say goodbye. Shortly thereafter, just before another Christmas, my mother would be diagnosed with cancer and would slip quietly though painfully away. At least I was able to spend some time with her.

It is perhaps for this reason that whenever Christmas comes around, a large part of me braces for an unbearable sadness. It has been mitigated, over the years, by the presence of my children who unfortunately never got to meet their grandparents. But despite this, the sense of cheer, the sense of reunion, of family gathering, contrasts sharply with the sense of loss. It is not something I ever speak about, and I am careful never to raise this with my kids. And yet, how many, like me, wear the memory of sad tidings the event inevitably brings.

My faith life has always been the anchor at these times. Many write of the true meaning of the season and the importance of celebrating Christ’s birth amid the



Reese Holderbein

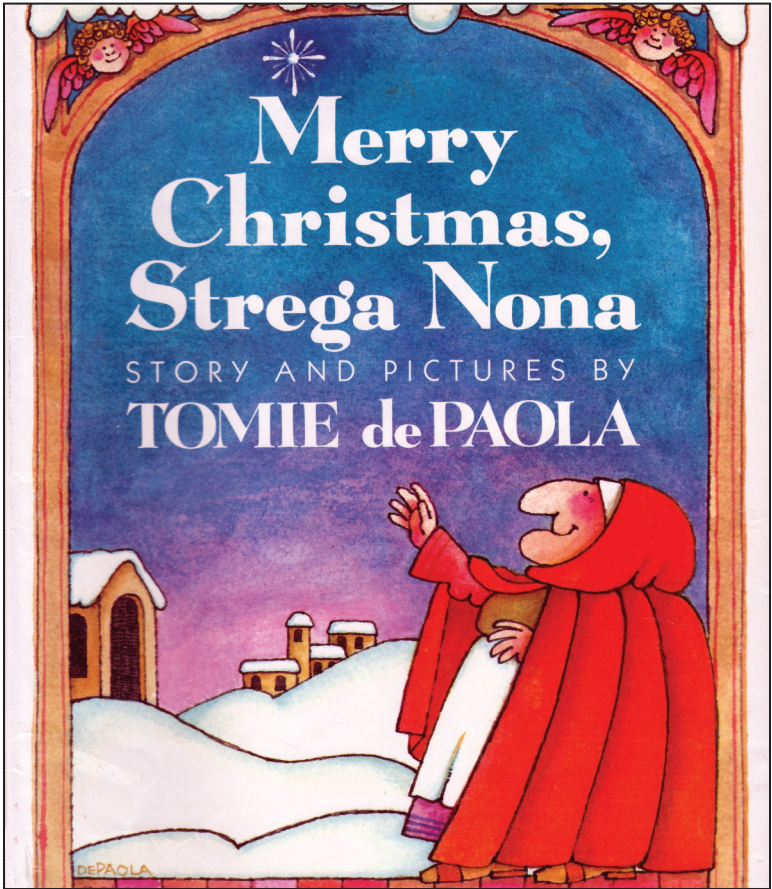
**SHEPHERDS REJOICE** — “ ‘Whom have you seen, O shepherds? Speak, tell us, who has appeared on earth?’ ‘A child, we saw, and choirs of angels praising the Lord!’ ” — *Matins, Divine Office, Roman Rite.* (Reese Holderbein is a Grade 4 student at All Saints Catholic School in Swift Current, Sask, Holy Trinity Catholic School Division.)

onslaught of commercialization. For me this takes on a special significance. The birth of Jesus is a reminder of joy, both in the moment (the birth itself), but also in the long term (what it represents for our salvation). It is here I can

remind myself that my parents are not lost to me; that they have been saved and that I will be reunited with them. Our Lord’s sacrifice is equally a reminder of what giving truly is — at a level and scope that no human can ever undertake, and

that we perhaps can only vaguely ever understand. But what a precious gift it is. For that we should be deeply thankful.

Merry Christmas and God bless, from all of us at St. Mary’s University in Calgary.



**CLASSIC BOOK** — *Merry Christmas, Strega Nona*, written and illustrated by Tomie dePaola, published in 1986, is a timeless children’s Christmas classic.

## Christmas classics to read this season

By Maria Morrow

One of the best ways parents and children can get into the Christmas spirit is to spend time reading Christmas books! There are many excellent choices. Here are just a few that are worth a look.

*The Clown of God*, written and illustrated by Tomie dePaola, is a beautifully illustrated book that retells a traditional story. Giovanni is an orphaned beggar boy who earns his food by juggling. Before long, Giovanni becomes a famous performer who travels across Italy.

In his last years of life, however, he once more becomes a poor beggar as his juggling skills decline and crowds begin to mock him. He finally returns to his hometown on a cold, rainy Christmas Eve and seeks refuge in the brightly lit church, where a procession of gifts is happening.

Giovanni also wants to offer a gift to Jesus, so he decides to juggle one last time. His final — and best — performance is offered as a birthday gift to the serious Christ Child on his mother’s lap.

After old Giovanni falls to the ground, the priest and brother see that the statue of the child is now smiling and holding one of Giovanni’s juggling balls. This story is a great reminder to all of us that our gifts, talents and skills come to fulfilment when they are offered to God.

*Morrow is the mother of six and adjunct professor of Catholic Studies at Seton Hall University in New Jersey.*

*The Miracle of Saint Nicholas* by Gloria Whelan and illustrated by Judith Brown, is a Christmas story that takes place in Russia. The local Orthodox church was shut down many years ago by atheist communists, but now a young boy named Alexi wants the town to celebrate Christmas inside it again.

Alexi sweeps out the dusty church, and the townspeople take notice, beginning to share in his excitement. From talking with his babushka, grandmother, Alexi realizes that the church is missing many important items: candles, altar cloths, bread and wine, the icon of St. Nicholas and a priest.

He believes, however, that the celebration of Christmas will once again happen at the church. And indeed, Alexi discovers that the persecuted Christians of his town have preserved the faith (and the priest!) throughout the years.

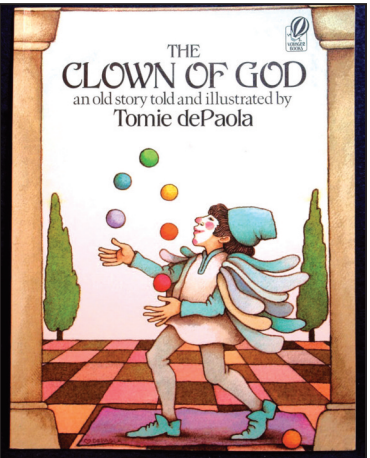
Illustrated with lovely watercolours, the book shows how the Christian faith can be remembered, though hidden, and rekindled in the Christmas celebration. It is a great reminder to all of us that being Christian is not always easy. With the villagers’ perseverance in faith, hope and love, added to Alexi’s desire and courage to celebrate in the church, Christmas always wins out in the end.

*Merry Christmas, Strega Nona*, written and illustrated by Tomie dePaola is an excellent book for Catholic children because it includes a portrayal of Advent, as well as Christmas. Strega Nona, or Grandma Witch, faithfully lights the candles on her

Advent wreath as she works hard to prepare for Christmas.

Big Anthony, who helps Strega Nona, gets tired of the hard work and would prefer that she just use her magic to get ready for the Christmas feast she is hosting. When the big day finally comes, it looks like Strega Nona must cancel her Christmas Eve party, due to the ever-irresponsible Anthony.

She prays before the Nativity set at the church, noting sadly that she will be alone on Christmas, much like Jesus. It turns out, however, that Anthony has been listening to Strega Nona and has organized the feast himself as a gift.



*Clown of God*, written and illustrated by Tomie dePaola, was published in 1978.

This story reminds us, using Strega Nona’s words, that, “Christmas has a magic of its own.” No matter how extensive our preparations — cleaning, cooking, buying gifts — we are not ultimately responsible for the joy of Christmas.

Peace begins in the heart  
and reaches around the world...



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# Memorial liturgy for Holodomor a learning experience

## Both Lungs

Brent Kostyniuk



During 1932 and 1933 an estimated seven to 10 million people starved to death in Soviet controlled Ukraine because of a man-made famine, the Holodomor — death by starvation — even though the country was producing bumper crops of grain. Recently 340 elementary children at St. Theresa of Calcutta Catholic School in Edmonton gathered for a memorial liturgy to honour Holodomor victims. The liturgy was celebrated by Edmonton Eparchial Bishop David Motiuk along with Edmonton Catholic Schools chaplain Rev. Julian Bilyj.

In speaking to the children, Bishop David explained this little-known atrocity. “Imagine living in a country where there was so much wheat and corn and all kinds of other grains that no one had to worry about not having enough to eat. Well, in Ukraine, the homeland of my ancestors and many other Canadians, that was exactly what happened in the years 1932 and 1933. There was food in abundance. Yet millions of people died of starvation. That time in history is called the “Ukrainian Famine” or simply “Holodomor,” which is a Ukrainian word meaning “death by starvation.”

“At that time Ukraine was part of a large group of countries called the Soviet Union with Russia as the ruling country. The rulers wanted to crush the heart of the Ukrainian people, especially the farmers, who wanted to be free from the slavery of their parents and grandparents. So in the years 1932 - 1933, the people on the farms were told that they had to produce a certain amount of

grain, which was impossible to fulfil. Everything had to be sent to fill granaries in Russia. The government’s policy was simple: seize the grain and let the peasants starve to death. Every handful of grain was collected. Any one who refused paid huge fines or were put to death. Even children were arrested for gathering any grain that might have escaped the eye of the authorities. Millions died from starvation, their lives stolen from them.”

Bishop David also spoke about the significance of the Holodomor today, even to school children. “Understandably, it is easy to feel hopeless in the midst of so much darkness. Yet, as Christians, we are people of hope. We cannot turn back the pages of history, but we can work towards a brighter future.”

He offered a number of concrete activities young students and adults alike can take part in. “At our schools and parishes, we can pray for the souls of the Holodomor victims and their families. Through education we can learn more about the past and learn from our mistakes. We can fight hunger in our own communities by donating to the food bank, serving a meal at a soup kitchen, or distributing food hampers to local needy families. There may even be some here today who are hungry and need our help. Finally, let us honour the memory of the millions who died during the Holodomor by prayerfully committing their souls to the Lord. As we say in Ukrainian, *Vichna jim pamjat* — God grant them Eternal Memory.”

The Holodomor Memorial was organized by Elizabeth Dokken, a Grade 3 teacher at St. Theresa’s. She explains why she did it. “Holodomor, though it still stands as the most horrific act of genocide during peace times, is perhaps one of the least well-known events in history. I remember being in junior high and learning about Marx,

Lenin and Stalin. There wasn’t a very strong emphasis placed on the horrors that had been inflicted upon the Ukrainian people while under Stalin’s rule, but when we talked about the communes and the people who had starved, it made me want to learn more. I knew that my *gido* — grandfather — had not lived in Ukraine at the time, but would have more knowledge of what had happened. It was a proud moment when he volunteered to come to my class and tell about Holodomor. When he spoke about the pain and suffering of the Ukrainian people, and used numbers as big as five million to account for the victims, I thought he had to be wrong. We all knew about the Holocaust and yet this event seemed to be just as important. How could no one be willing to talk about it?”

“Through the dedication of people like my *gido* who wanted the world to know what had really happened, Holodomor would eventually be accepted by governments around the world as an act of genocide, one of the most horrific events in history. We have come a long way in teaching the world about what occurred in 1932, but there is a long way yet to go before people truly understand this event . . . (it is) important that we, as teachers, educate our students about Holodomor so this event does not disappear into the past. For that reason, as a legacy to my ancestors from Ukraine, for those who suffered, and for those people like my *gido* who wanted to teach the world about what happened, I decided to organize a school-wide Holodomor Day.”

Kyle Porter, principal of St. Theresa’s, saw the memorial not only as a “both lungs,” but as something many of his students could relate to in a personal way. “It was a beautiful experience for



Brent Kostyniuk

**HOLODOMOR MEMORIAL — Steven Dokken and Victoria Kostyniuk perform a lyrical dance about a 10-year-old boy starving to death during the Holodomor.**

our children to pray in the Eastern tradition and to build the cultural capacity of our community. Being an inner-city school, where many of our families struggle with hunger and experiences of displacement due to war, this memorial connected our community to the victims of famine in Ukraine.”

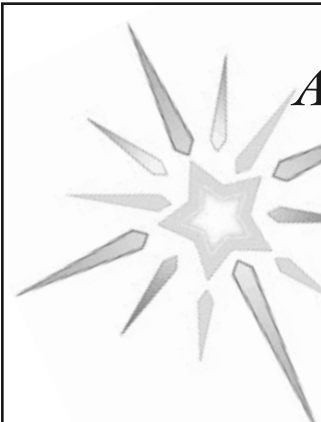
Following the Memorial, Steven Dokken and Victoria Kostyniuk from St. Basil’s Language Arts Society performed a lyrical dance about a 10-year-old boy who is dying of starvation. In his despair, the young boy is comforted by a spirit who brings him peace in his last moments.

They were accompanied on the bandura Dr. Andrij Hornjatkevyc.

Since 2008, the fourth Saturday in November has been officially recognized in Alberta as a memorial day in remembrance of Holodomor victims.

Whether we are remembering the victims of the Holodomor or helping hungry inner-city residents, there is always work to do. Now, as Christmas approaches, we are reminded that, East and West, we are all united in celebrating Christ’s birth and the hope he brings us. May you be blessed with good health, abundance, peace, and love.

*Kostyniuk, who lives in Edmonton, has a bachelor of theology from Newman and is a freelance writer. He and his wife Bev have been married for 39 years and have eight grandchildren.*



**A God who Became  
so Small  
Could only be  
Mercy and Love**

Thérèse de Lisieux

*Abundant blessings and joy  
of God’s greatest gift!*

*Joyeux Noel!*

Les Filles de la Providence  
Daughters of Providence

*Behold,  
the virgin shall conceive and bear a  
son,  
and they  
shall name him  
Emmanuel.  
which means  
“God is with us.”*

**Merry Christmas!**



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# Baptism calls us to be a light for those in darkness

## Liturgy and Life

Catherine Ecker



As we prepare to celebrate mass on Dec. 25 we are invited to pause and strive to hear the words of Scripture through new ears so that God’s message for us in 2017 is not lost in the familiar stories.

Throughout the season of Advent, we have heard the words of Isaiah filled with hope, and now the message is one of fulfilment and peace. Isaiah announces: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shone.” This sentence can bring calm to my spirit and peace into my day.

Scripture scholars remind us that Isaiah exercised his ministry as a prophet for about 40 years. Isaiah was prophesying during the reign of three kings of Judah. The kings were not strong leaders and the historical situation of Judah was depicted as a time of doom and darkness. Although we cannot know for certain the time of this particular prophesy, we do know that it speaks of a time when darkness has been replaced by joy.

Walking in darkness can be a lonely and dangerous path. For a few months in 1978 I lived in Whitehorse,

*Ecker, a parish catechist and freelance writer, speaker and facilitator lives in Barrie, Ont. For over 35 years she has presented and led times of formation on catechetical and liturgical topics throughout Canada. She is married, a parent and grandparent Reach her at catherineecker56@gmail.com*

where it was dark almost all day. The darkness could seep into your bones and mind, making it difficult to live with joy.

Isaiah’s words of fulfilment bring me peace, especially as I see the landscape around me looking dull and lifeless. Sometimes it seems the darkness in nature is amplified by the darkness in our families, communities and country. The darkness of fear, doubt, poor health, grief, impending death, an uncertain financial future and broken promises can make it difficult for us to hear the words of joy from the prophet Isaiah. As church, as disciples, how are we called to hear and live the message of Isaiah? How are we to embrace what it means to be people who have walked in darkness and have seen a great light?

In the familiar story from Luke’s Gospel the shepherds may give us a clue as to how we are to live. Luke wants us to know that the birth of Jesus took place during a particular time in our history. The actual account of the

Christmas Day	Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7
December 25, 2017	Psalm 96
	Titus 2:11-14
	Luke 2:1-16

birth of Jesus is rather brief. The last part of this Gospel account turns our attention to angels and shepherds.

The first message of the angels to the shepherds is “Do not be afraid.” Who in your life needs to hear these words? How can you share with others the truth that we do not need to live in fear?

Luke makes it clear that the birth of Jesus is not for a select few; indeed, the angels are bringing news of great joy for all people. I cannot imagine the shepherds hearing this news and carrying on with their nightly routine.

Today, as we hear the Gospel, we already know Christ and we know how the story unfolds. The shepherds did not. They went with haste to see if the angels were telling



the truth. One thing we know for certain is that the shepherds did not keep this news to themselves. They shared it with others.

In my own life I think of how I share the good news of Christmas. For me a significant piece of the good news is that Jesus, our Saviour, is born in a stable and his first visitors were not the elite of the society. They were the poor and often considered the outcasts. Jesus came to bring good news to all people, including the people who walk in darkness. In my life and in the lives of many, there are people who walk in perpetual darkness and we who know Christ are called to be a light in their world.

During this season our society is decorated with vibrant lights that sparkle and dispel the darkness of long nights and shorter days. If we, the followers of Christ, are going to live out our baptism, we need to be a light for those who are suffering, experiencing poverty, loneliness and despair. We are called to let the light of Christ, which no darkness can extinguish, shine through so that the message of Christmas is not just heard, it is witnessed and experienced by all people.

# Christmas brings us all back to the crib of life to start over again

## In Exile

Ron Rolheiser, OMI



What does Christmas mean? Christmas is like a perfectly cut diamond twirling in the sun, giving off an array of sparkles. Here are just some of its meanings:

- A four-year-old child woke

up one night frightened, convinced that there were all kinds of spooks and monsters in her room. In terror she fled to her parents’ bedroom. Her mother took her back to her room and, after soothing

her fears, assured her it was safe there: “You don’t need to be afraid. After I leave, you won’t be alone in the room. God will be here with you!” “I know that God will be here,” the child protested, “but I need someone in this room who has some skin.” The word was made flesh and dwelt among us. John 1, 14.

• God is not found in monasteries, but in our homes. Wherever you find husband and wife, that’s where you find God; wherever children and petty cares and cooking and arguments and reconciliation are, that’s where God is too. The God I’m telling about, the domestic one, not the monastic one, that’s the real God. Nikos Kazantzakis.

• Every year of life waxes and wanes. Every stage of life comes and goes. Every facet of life is born and then dies. Every good moment is doomed to become only a memory. Every perfect period of living slips through our fingers and disappears. Every hope dims and every possibility turns eventually to dry clay. Until Christmas comes again. Then we are called at the deepest, most subconscious, least cognizant level to begin to live again. Christmas brings us all back to the crib of life to start over again:

aware of what has gone before, conscious that nothing can last, but full of hope that this time, finally, we can learn what it takes to live well, grow to full stature of soul and spirit, and get it right. Joan Chittister.

• After a mother has smiled for a long time at her child, the child will begin to smile back; she has awakened love in its heart, and in awakening love in its heart, she awakes also recognition. In the same way, God awakes before us as love. Love radiates from God and instills the light of love in our hearts. Hans Urs Von Balthasar.

• At Christmas, through his grace-filled birth, God says to the world: “I am there. I am with you. I am your life. . . . Do not be afraid to be happy. For ever since I wept, joy is the standard of living that is really more suitable than the anxiety and grief of those who think they have no hope. . . . This reality, this incomparable wonder of my almighty love, I have sheltered safely in the cold stable of your world. I am there. I no longer go away from this world. Even if you do not see me. I am there. It is Christmas. Light the candles! They have more right to exist than all the darkness. It is Christmas. Christmas lasts forever.” Karl Rahner.

• Even at Christmas, when halos are pre-tested by focus groups for inclusion in mass-market campaigns, they are hard to see. . . . This is how halos are seen, by looking up into largeness, by tucking smallness into folds of infinity. I do not know this by contemplating shimmer-

ing trees. Rather, there was a woman, busy at the Christmas table, and I looked up to catch a rim of radiance etching her face, to notice curves of light sliding along her shape. She out-glowed the candles. All the noise of the room left my ears and silence sharpened my sight. When this happens, I do not get overly excited. I merely allow love to be renewed, for that is the mission of haloes, the reason they are given to us. . . . But when haloes fade, they do not abruptly vanish, abandoning us to the lesser light. They recede, as Gabriel departed from Mary, leaving us pregnant. John Shea.

• Some of the Church Fathers compared Jesus to a singer with a strong voice and perfect pitch who joins a discordant choir and completely transforms it. It is not that Jesus gave us a different set of songs to sing, but helped us instead to perform our standard repertoire in an entirely new and more beautiful way. Richard McBrien.

• The incarnation does not mean that God saves us from the pains of this life. It means that God-is-with-us. For the Christian, just as for everyone else, there will be cold, lonely seasons, seasons of sickness, seasons of frustration, and a season within which we will die. Christmas does not give us a ladder to climb out of the human condition. It gives us a drill that lets us burrow into heart of everything that is and, there, find it shimmering with divinity. Avery Dulles.

• Looking for God these days requires the willingness to investigate the small. Aztec poem.

*May the God Child  
be your joy and your hope  
as we celebrate the feast of LOVE*

*Merry Christmas and a Blessed New Year!*

*General Administration of the Missionary Oblate Sisters  
of the Sacred Heart and Mary Immaculate*

*Unit 111-420 DesMeurons St., Winnipeg, MB R2H 2M9*

Christmas column, Dec. 19, 2010. Rolheiser, theologian, teacher, and award-winning author, is president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He can be contacted through his website: [www.ron-rolheiser.com](http://www.ron-rolheiser.com). Now on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/ronrolheiser](https://www.facebook.com/ronrolheiser)



# At Christmas, and beyond, advocate for refugee rights

## Journey to Justice

Joe Gunn



Do you believe Canada is a welcoming place for refugees?

After the arrival of over 40,000 Syrian refugees since November 2015, many hosted by Christian congregations, readers of the *Prairie Messenger* likely believe that Christians are more inclusive than others in Canadian society. And we should be proud of that — if only it were true.

The Angus Reid Institute released a public opinion poll in May that allowed Canadian

*Gunn is the Ottawa-based executive director of Citizens for Public Justice, [www.cpj.ca](http://www.cpj.ca), a member-driven, faith-based public policy organization focused on ecological justice, refugee rights and poverty elimination.*

respondents to define themselves in one of four categories: the “religiously faithful,” “spiritually uncertain,” and “non-believers.” The spectrum of Canadian mindsets on religion is not surprising: 19 per cent self-define as non-believers, 30 per cent are each of spiritually uncertain, or privately faithful, with 21 per cent religiously committed.

Then, all were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: “Canada should accept fewer immigrants and refugees.” I was shocked to read the results of this poll.

Sixty-four per cent of “religiously committed” and 59 per cent of “privately faithful” respondents want Canada to close our doors. This is greater than the Canadian population at large (57

per cent). And, in a related query, fully 36 per cent of the “religiously committed” said: “I would feel uncomfortable if my son or daughter were planning to marry someone from a different cultural or religious background.” (That also was higher than the Canadian average — by 10 per cent.)

Polls report what respondents say. They do not explain what makes people of faith in Canada less willing to be welcoming and tolerant of newcomers or our neighbours from different cultural and religious backgrounds. They do not answer why the public urgings of the Catholic hierarchy and other religious leaders have been ignored. But poll results can incite religious leaders and all members of religious organizations to get busy changing perceptions and attitudes.

At the three-day conference of the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR), which took place in Niagara Falls in early December, CCR president Loly Rico laid out the challenge. Before 300 participants from some of the 195-member groups which assist refugees, Rico clearly stated that “migrant rights are human rights.” She stat-

ed that we must help people understand that “human rights don’t stop or start at any border,” but are inherently present in every human being.

Herself a refugee from El Salvador 27 years ago, Rico now runs three houses in Toronto, owned by religious sisters, the Faithful Companions of Jesus. Only one day prior, she was awarded a 150th Anniversary Medal by the Canadian Senate.

The CCR is afraid that the Trump administration will cause further “irregular crossings” of vulnerable persons from the United States. The main thing to understand is that such persons are not making “illegal” crossings. By signing the UN Convention on Refugees, Canada agreed to give each and every refugee claimant a chance to a hearing — and to prove they have the right to remain here.

According to the CCR, Amnesty International, and the Canadian Council of Churches, it is the Safe Third Country Agreement (signed by Canada and the U.S. in 2004) that makes such crossings treacherous. By this agreement, any refugee arriving at a Canadian port of entry from the U.S. is automatically returned. Thus, at Emerson, Man., and Lacolle, Que., refugee claimants must bypass official border posts, and apply for refugee status after taking circuitous routes. Rico wants the misnamed “safe” agreement to be scrapped, in order to “bring back the right to make a refugee claim at any port of entry of this country, by land, sea or air.”

Unfortunately, however, because the government has not increased resources for the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), a large backlog is developing. Ottawa responded by announcing a review of the IRB’s effectiveness, hoping to make the refugee determination process more “efficient.” The CCR fears that, instead of strengthening the independence and effectiveness of the IRB, this review could recommend that ministerial bureaucrats take on this

role. (An interim report due in December might indicate some directions the final report due in June 2018 will recommend.)

This federal government has made some policy improvements — raising the age of dependents to 22 years to allow families to bring their children to Canada, and ending interest charges on travel loans that refugees must repay (sponsoring churches and Citizens for Public Justice have demanded that these loans be scrapped altogether in order to decrease financial burdens on newcomers). Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada has also promised to end the backlog of private sponsorship requests by 2019. But in November, the government announced that Canada will only take 7,500 Government-Assisted Refugees in 2018 (the CCR had recommended 20,000).

Pope Francis holds the situation of refugees “constantly in my thoughts and prayers.” His message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace (Jan. 1, 2018) is entitled, “Migrants and refugees: men and women in search of peace.” Francis notes that there are over 250 million migrants worldwide, of whom 22.5 million are refugees. And the pope lays out four mileposts for action to assist asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and victims of human trafficking: “welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating.” These four verbs are to be implemented in public policy, according to the Vatican, by 20 action points that can help the international community adopt two UN Global Compacts (one on refugees, and the other on safe, orderly and regular migration) that are currently being negotiated.

Taking Francis’ call to heart here in Canada, our faith communities must increase our efforts to change the hearts and minds of members. Only then will we understand the words of St. Paul in Hebrews 13:2: “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”



A WELCOMING PLACE? — A group of Haitians wait to cross the U.S.-Canada border into Quebec from New York in late August. According to an Angus Reid Institute opinion poll, 64 per cent of “religiously committed” and 59 per cent of “privately faithful” respondents want Canada to close our doors, writes Joe Gunn.

May Peace and Joy  
fill your hearts  
this Christmas!

MERRY CHRISTMAS

from the  
Saskatchewan Knights of Columbus

Христос Раждається! Славімо Його!  
Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

As we celebrate the joyful  
Feast of the Nativity of  
Our Lord, we extend to all  
the readers of the *Prairie  
Messenger* the wonderful  
tidings of Emmanuel, that  
God is with us and  
understands all you  
nations! For unto us a  
Child is given!

May the deep joy and peace of His birth be celebrated in your homes this Christmas. May the Blessing of Emmanuel fill your heart and the hearts of those in your family, the domestic church, with joy and gladness this Christmas and strengthen you to witness for Christ in the New Year. **З нами Бог!**

Bishop Bryan Bayda, CSsR,  
Bishop Emeritus Michael Wiwchar, CSsR,  
Clergy, Religious Members and all the faithful  
of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Saskatoon



# Walking the Red Path: reclaiming ancestral roots

The following is from the Winter 2017 issue of Catholic Missions In Canada ([www.cmic.info](http://www.cmic.info)) and is reprinted with permission.

By Dillon DeWitt

The sound of drums is original to the land, but new for many of the young people living on it.

St. Theresa Point is one of 63 First Nation reserves located in Manitoba. The reserve is part of a cluster of Island Lake communities distinguished from the others by its unique crossroads of church and tradition.

The community is connected to the mainland by an ice road and bush plane that carries passengers 289 air miles to the city of Winnipeg. “We’re remote but not as far away from everything as you might think,” notes Jodi Harper, father of three and an educator who recently graduated from the local University College of the North. While the geographic barrier is a surmountable one, meeting the cost of a two-way ticket can be a significant obstacle for low wage-earning residents.

But the cost to transport cargo is cheaper than purchasing goods on-reserve. “Many visitors see the prices at our store and become shocked by them. Everything we have is flown in, so it’s very expensive.”

Despite lacking access to emergency health services, chronic under-employment, and high living costs, migrations off-reserve are rare. According to the last census in 2011, about 80 per cent of St. Theresa Point’s popu-

lation remain in the community.

Harper hasn’t always lived on Island Lake, but doesn’t intend to leave it again any time soon, despite the hardships.

“We’re in the middle of our decolonization period and it shows. But things are especially difficult for an Aboriginal person in the city. Everyone here knows that. People look at you differently. I don’t want to go back there. There’s no loneliness here. This is my home.”

While the council helps plan community development, bringing in service projects and funding for new infrastructure, there are some urban amenities and comforts that the reserve never gets. “Our road grader went down so the potholes are really bad. I have no idea when or if it will ever be fixed,” he said.

But road graders are low on the list of priorities. Elders seek different ways to bring youth into the community and improve their social outcomes.

Hazel Harper, Jodi’s mother and regional co-ordinator for the university, advocates for Oji-Cree immersion programs and perspectives in education that reject the destructive influences of European systems of knowledge on Aboriginal learners. She understands how it feels to go against a dominant or mainstream society, as well the benefits of deviating from assigned roles and expectations. “I was the first woman to take part in many of the ceremonies we use today. I was given the name Blue Heron. It was explained to me that blue herons stand very tall and alone in the water. Like a blue heron, I was by myself and standing with the other men.”



Dillon DeWitt, Canada, 2016

**STORYTELLING** — The apex of a teepee is a cluster of timber poles fastened together with rope or twine. The structure is wrapped in canvas or hide. Though once a dwelling, the teepees of St. Theresa Point are often used for storytellers to share their songs and stories with young people over a sacred fire. The poles represent unity and interdependence.

Hazel and her husband, Chris Harper, embarked on a journey to rediscover traditional or Aboriginal ceremonies from practising elders and began to reintroduce them to St. Theresa Point in the late-1980s. “It was very divisive at first. A lot of our families stopped talking to us. They thought that what we were doing was at odds with the church. Initially, there was a lot of skepticism about it, but very slowly we started attracting more people.”

Sectarian differences between reserves in the Island Lake region define them spatially and culturally. About 95 per cent of St. Theresa Point identifies as Roman Catholic, but just across the channel, the United Methodist Church holds a strong and unwavering majority.

As a testament to the success of

the Harpers’ efforts to reintroduce traditional teachings, the annual Faith Family Retreat has attracted major attention from church leaders. In 2016, archbishops Richard Gagnon, Albert LeGatt, and Murray Chatlain visited the small fly-in reserve, recognizing and supporting indigenous customs that were prohibited only a century ago from public practice. The historic moment was celebrated by all in attendance. “I was frankly shocked that they actually came,” an elder exclaimed. “It’s the highest honour we could have received.”

The archbishops arrived to fanfare and departed shortly after the Catholic Marian Retreat, a cultural camp devoted to St. Mary and her disciples. The holy men were present to bless the arrival of a sacred relic of St. Kateri.

Most in the community attribute healing to the embrace of a traditional identity, but are careful not to contradict church doctrine.

“I kept my religions apart as I walked the Red Path — that’s what they call it when you go back — when a person who lives in white society decides to reclaim some of

their ancestral roots, their ancestral being,” says Elvin Flett. He recalls a story in his youth when he would visit the missionary theatre and unwittingly celebrate John Wayne and his heroics against the film’s Navajo fighters. “We used to cheer on the cavalry to come in and take out the Indians. We didn’t know any better. We were kids,” he said.

The changes that have spurred cultural rediscovery are still active, with many youth and elders just recently coming to embrace the customs of their ancestors. St. Theresa Point’s progress in reintegration and holistic healing of the community has garnered widespread support.

With the annual retreats growing each year, more visitors decide to journey for the spiritual education that the elders of St. Theresa provide. It has become the first leg of the Red Path for wayward Oji-Cree learning how to grasp the recognition of their status as members of a vibrant nation, and many will trod this path as they confront their community’s history.

“All of us have to decide how we want to get back,” Flett says. “We must be proactive.”

Merry Christmas & Happy New Year



Behold  
the virgin will  
conceive and bear a  
Son, and they  
will call him  
Immanuel  
which means  
“God with us”  
— Matthew 1.23



Emmanuel  
Care  
A Catholic Health Organization



St. Joseph's  
Hospital



St. Peter's Hospital  
"Together We Care"



ST. JOSEPH'S  
Integrated Health Centre



ProvidencePlace



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# Preparing readies hearts to be broken open by love

## Barefoot and Preaching

Leah Perrault



Preparing a place is one of my favourite things. We love having the guest room full, the bed made and food planned, the anticipation

*Perrault is a wife and mom, a grateful employee of Emmanuel Care, and a speaker, writer and consultant at [www.leahperrault.com](http://www.leahperrault.com)*

of time spent with people we love. Preparing makes space, in our home and inside of us, for those who are coming. And this year, for the second time, we are pregnant in Advent. It's a beautiful connection to the ancient Story of God coming as an infant.

I have a rounded belly growing full of mischievous movement, and I feel exposed and empty as I pre-

pare for Christmas. We have crawled through a miscarriage, a season of unemployment, and a cavernous death. The planting work of living, of daily meals and tidying, of tucking in and washing hands, was laboured and late. We showed up and watered and fed with all the strength we had and it was not much. The fall harvest was spotty at best. There was more grace than we put in, and that was a miracle. The cut-off straw that is our family lies poking through the snow, having survived.

We have had so little to give; I am seeing that nothing has given us everything. *All the years we have spent preparing for guests actually taught us how to let people in.* This year, so many friends and strangers have walked into

our mess with food and cleaning supplies, with hands for folding laundry, with a willingness to be with us in tears and big emotions. The bathrooms have not been as clean as I would like them. The kitchen has had stacks of paper and toys on surfaces that I want clear. The drawers and closets are getting out of hand.

*Our people came anyway.*

Jesus is coming, again, to our messy world. He chooses us over and over. And he's the kind of guest that comes, and if we are willing, stays all year. He doesn't care about the boxes from moving that remain unpacked, the mess in the junk drawer, or the toothpaste clumps in the sink. Actually, Jesus finds treasures in the mess I am trying to hide, pulls joy out of my sadness, finds space and meaning and possibility in my emptiness.

With a fourth baby, the "spare" guest room will have its last season as a spare. When the guests leave, we'll work in a crib, and it will appear that we have no room. But the appearance is a lie. More people makes more room for love in me, not less.

The preparations for the baby are so much like the ones for guests: wash and fold, make small spaces simply welcoming, set out towels, make something comforting, get a little extra sleep. Pinterest dupes us into thinking everything must be grand and colour-co-ordinated, but Pinterest is wrong. Preparing readies my heart to be broken open by love.

Jesus came to an unwed, teenage mother and a foster father who chose faith. He came in a stable and their little family became refugees in Egypt to flee a massacre of infant boys. Jesus

wept for my little Claire, held us in job loss, sent us every gift in death and grief, gifted our next-awaited baby boy. Jesus is not a stranger to our raw and exposed wounds, since has known us and loved us in the emptiness. He has been preparing to come to us again as we are.

Preparing my heart and my home requires a recognition of what I can do without becoming hardened by resentment, burdened by my own unrealistic expectations, and distracted by the unnecessary. The straw and the snow and the sky are a stark and simple beauty, so I am preparing with some more slow, some more gentle, some more kind.

Preparing from emptiness feels shaky and weak, and it also clarifies that I only ever have myself to give anyway. When I am empty there is more space for the Ones coming. There is a snowy road stretching in front of me and also nothing to stop me from taking just one step at a time.

Christmas is about the simplest things. God in this time and this place. Generosity and hospitality. Hope in struggle. Light in overwhelming darkness. Because I get so lost in the complicated, so caught up in trying to hold it all together, so defeated by the brokenness of it all, I need to prepare for things to get simple, small, empty. *Christmas comes anyway.*

O Come, Emmanuel, come and stay with me. Help me to see the beauty in the simple and the slow and the possible. Let the empty space I feel in loss fill with Your uncluttered presence and grace. May I prepare only what makes more room for love this Christmas. Amen.



Janice Weber

**MORE SPACE** — "There is a snowy road stretching in front of me and also nothing to stop me from taking just one step at a time."

## Christmas is a season of celebration, and the reasons are many

By Paul Paproski, OSB

A biology teacher asked her Grade 3 students to write an essay on "childbirth" in their families. Ginelle went home and asked her mother how she was born. Her mother, feeling awkward with the question, said, "We went quadding in the northern trails and found you in a nicely wrapped Christmas package." Continuing her assignment, Ginelle asked her grandma Nellie how Nellie's daughter came as a child. Her grandma did not know what to say and reflected for a moment. "There was a storm and lots of elves came. I found your mother in a baby carriage in my garden." Ginelle, feeling astonished, asked her great-grandmother, Cathy, how she received grandma as a baby. "I picked her from a basket I found near the horse barn," said the surprised great-grandma.

With this information, Ginelle, wrote her essay. She was excited when her biology teacher, Jana, and her science teacher, Erica, encouraged her to read her well-written article in front of their classes. Ginelle stood up and began, "It is hard to believe, but I just found out there was not even a single natural birth in my family

*Paproski is a monk at St. Peter's Abbey in Muenster, Sask.*

for three generations. It is like we came from another world."

The humorous story speaks to another unnatural birth that is spoken of in Isaiah. It is the birth of a child who came in a way that no one has ever seen or experienced because it is the birth of God as a man — Jesus Christ, son of God and son of man, as our Saviour.

Christmas is a season of celebration and there are at least three good reasons to celebrate. Christmas is the birthday of God who became man and saviour. It is the birthday of God who came to share his love with us. It is the time when we remember how Almighty God came to live with us as Emmanuel (God with us).

The idea of the divine becoming a helpless child is hard to fathom. It is not natural, and so we can only look on this supernatural event with wonder and awe. The secular world has its own version of this holy story. It is retold through the commercialization of the marketplace. For those who celebrate the birth of Christ, it is good to see the humour in the varied understandings of the natural and supernatural, the secular and the holy.

*Christmas began with the birth of the Christ Child in a quiet, dark place, away from the busy life of the city. Joseph and Mary could not find a place in the inn and settled*

*for a stable (or cave) with a manger to place their newborn child.*

The trademark of the Christmas season is festivity and crowds. Seasonal music, decorations, and food (lots of food) make the season joyful. Songs lift the spirits and encourage shopping. The darkness and silence of the first Christmas has been pushed back to Halloween. Halloween has claimed the original darkness which is celebrated, not in a mystical light, but in the eerie shadows that hide demons and ghosts.

*The first Christmas was celebrated by two ordinary people, Mary and Joseph, in an insignificant town of no political importance. The first visitors to the Holy Family were shepherds who had a low social status.*

Celebrities are integral to making the Christmas season exciting. Celebrities come into our homes through advertisements, movies and concerts. Companies use the famous to sell the latest products that entertain, fill a need or void. And where would Christmas be without the most famous celebrity for the season — Santa Claus?

*Mary and Joseph were two humble people who could only sit back and ponder what was happening.*

Time is of the essence in December. People are busy. Work schedules are heavier. The pace is

more hectic because of new deadlines. Organization and planning make everything come together.

*When the angels appeared to the shepherds to tell them of the birth of Jesus, the angels exclaimed, to the amazed shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth."*

The Christmas season is a season of giving, because there is "glory" in giving — "glory" in showing love for family and friends by giving. There is "glory" in finding a gift that will bring a smile of appreciation. And who can forget the "glory" of the parties with festive food and drinks!

*The people of Israel were expecting a Messiah who would be a powerful ruler. The Messiah came as a helpless child who turned out to be a disappointment.*

Impossible expectations for Christmas — those confined solely to the commercialism and secularism of the marketplace — are ultimately a disappointment. Even the high expectations of togetherness at Christmas can turn to disappointment for the lonely.

The birth of the divine is a mystery. It cannot be grasped or controlled or explained away. The eternal example of the Christmas spirit is found in a simple family — Mary and Joseph, and a child who would change our world.

There was no room at the inn for the Holy Family, and there is no room in the Christmas season for division. There is always room for the natural gifts of humour and laughter. A much simpler way to celebrate the supernatural gift of the first Christmas.

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# Audacious hope: letting go while hanging on

*“Signs and wonders are always doubted, and perhaps they are meant to be. In the absence of certainty, faith is more than mere opinion; it is hope.” — Mary Doria Russell in Children of God*

By Edna Froese

Hope is, by definition, tenuous. It is not certainty, not even probability. It is a clinging to the barely possible in the face of more likely undesirable possibilities. “Hope is the thing with feathers,” Emily Dickinson insisted, “That perches in the soul, / And sings the tune — without the words, / And never stops at all.” Hope is illogical and necessary, in equal measure. “Faith, hope, and love,” declared St. Paul, are the bedrock of theology. Also of sociology and psychology.

Also of stories. Whether the stories are fiction or history or memoir or true in some other sense, we listen with longing for wisdom and for a resolution that will satisfy. For this reason, modern fiction and drama often frustrates us because of its seeming hopelessness, its bleak endings. I would argue, though, that hope is visible in the stoic courage of those who endure suffering without seeing an end. The little thing with feathers still “sings sweetest in the gale.”

One of literature’s frequent symbols of hope is the birth of a child. One tiny being suggests possibilities where none existed before. At the most elemental

*Froese taught English literature at St. Thomas More College in Saskatoon for many years until her retirement. She currently works part time as academic editor while relishing the freedom to read and write for pleasure.*

level, a baby means the parents are fertile — the clan will not die out, there will be another harvest, the tribe can thrive under better leadership. Ancient myths are replete with miraculous stories of birth. Anything is then possible; all things are possible.

Yet nothing is guaranteed. The hope-full Advent story includes swords and, later on, a cross. Even a cursory survey of literature offers sufficient examples of what T.S. Eliot calls the “hope for the wrong thing” (*East Coker*). When hope forgets humility and love turns into demand, the promised little one can only disappoint.

In *Howard’s End*, E.M. Forster’s classic British novel on social class, a rich capitalist family, a cultured, artistic, intelligent family, and a struggling low-class family with little in common, encounter one another through tentative friendships, and brief romances, only to fall into misunderstandings and antagonism. It all seems hopeless, until an illegitimate son is conceived out of a brief passion between the lower class young man and the younger daughter of the cultural elite. Despite that intimation of hope, though, the poor baby seems the child of an artificial marrying of intellectual concepts, not actual people.

Similarly, in two Canadian novels, Martha Ostenso’s *Wild Geese* and Sinclair Ross’s *As For Me and My House*, literally illegitimate children are made to embody hope for resolution of age-old conflicts. In *Wild Geese*,

the conflict is between a pioneer patriarch’s cold, selfish drive to possess and control both property and family, and his daughter’s earthy vitality, sensuality, and rebellious drive for freedom. It is a gender-driven conflict that pits materialism against nature itself, and nature, through the now-pregnant daughter, wins, if one can overlook the swashbuckling, impulsive father of the child who may or may not be able to provide adequately for his new partner and child.

In *As For Me and My House*, set in the 1930s, the situation is even bleaker. The narrator/protagonist and her husband, who have moved through several dustbowl towns, giving inadequate ministerial care to survivors of repeated crop failures, are both failed artists: he’s a painter and she’s a pianist. Neither had sufficient courage to match their artistic ambition and instead stumbled into a marriage and a half-sham performance as preacher and preacher’s wife. Everything around them and in them is infertile; they have no child (to the acute disappointment of them both) and their gardens die. The baby at the end is born of a brief liaison between the minister and a young parishioner (who conveniently dies in childbirth). The minister’s wife, who knows of the affair, insists that they adopt the baby and then move away into the big city to begin a new life with a new career. Such an adoption and such a marriage have but a snowball’s chance in hell of thriving, but there is no doubt Ross is using an ancient symbol of hope, possibly ironically.

Indeed, the hope seems the hope for the wrong thing. The poor babies are asked to bring peace to ancient oppositions and to do so without an adequate foundation of love.

Mary Doria Russell’s *The Sparrow* and its sequel, *Children of God*, also offer us babies as carriers of hope, but the tone is different. These novels are speculative fiction, located on earth and on Rakhat, a distant planet with two sentient species. The Jesuits’ first exploratory mission ends in seeming disaster, both for the planet and for the protagonist, whose faith, once close to sainthood, is utterly destroyed. Two babies play a crucial role. The first is born among refugees from an inter-species war of survival. The only human child on Rakhat,



Edna Froese

### Holding hope.

Isaac is fatherless and autistic; his mother, Sophia, sees no hope for this strange child among alien species. Yet he is gifted and creates an unearthly, uniquely beautiful piece of music based on the DNA sequences of humans, Runa, and Jana’ata. All three species recognize, in Isaac’s music, an example of God’s grace made manifest in the midst of ongoing tragedy. Audacious as it may seem, hope remains.

Back on earth again, at the end of the second novel, the weary ex-priest has gone, on the Day of the Dead, to weep alone at the tomb of the woman he had once hoped to marry. He has, he thinks, lost everyone he ever loved. A young woman with a baby approaches, addressing him as “Padre.” He looks in amazement at her features, startlingly familiar, and sees a daughter he did not know he had begotten just before he was forcibly taken back to Rakhat. In submission to this new manifestation of grace, he opens his damaged arms to receive little Tommaso, his grandchild. Not all doubt has been resolved — it never will be — but love has become possible again. Nothing else is asked of this little one, just love.

I end with a personal story. When I finally became pregnant with our oldest child, my parents had probably given up hope that we would ever give them grand-

children. At the time, my mother had entered another long period of depression. Even the brief return home of my older brother from Africa failed to rouse her from inner pain. My pregnancy was merely another cause for anxious fretting.

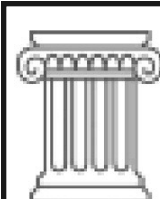
Yet among my family treasures is a photo of my mother holding our son for the first time. Her smile recalls the beauty of her youth, when she was full of hope for the future. Our baby brought her back out of the darkness, admittedly not for very long. Life rarely works that simply. Yet those few months of newfound joy were a gift, and still are.

As T. S. Eliot warned, hope can be the “hope of the wrong thing,” just as love can be “the love of the wrong thing.” Even our worthiest expectations can be hubristic wishful thinking, just as Jesus’ birth, in an occupied country to an oppressed people, raised hopes that were later nailed to the cross. This is not to say that we should not hope, for without hope, life — and love — cannot be sustained,

*But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.*

*Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:*

*So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.* (T.S. Eliot)



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# Catholic higher education’s rich intellectual tradition

By Terrence J. Downey

Early in his pontificate, in May 2014, Pope Francis spoke of the challenge for educators of humanizing the next generation: “The mission . . . is to develop a sense of truth, of what is good and beautiful.” This process involves “a rich path made up of many ingredients. This is why there are so many subjects — because development is the result of many elements that act together and stimulate intelligence, knowledge, the emotions, the body.” True education, he added, “enables us to love life and opens us to the fullness of life.”

While Pope Francis’ observations provide an apt description of the essence of the Catholic intellectual tradition that animates Catholic higher education in this country, they are also remarkably appropriate for the times in which we currently find ourselves.

Downey is president of St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

Throughout 2017 we have witnessed a distressing realignment in the international political environment. During this year the ground has shifted under the feet of western societies as human rights have been endangered, political discourse has become increasingly abusive and profane, great nations have turned inward, starving refugees have been turned away from wealthy shores, immigrants and those of certain faiths have been villainized as cynical politicians prey on peoples’ fears, ignorance and prejudices.

Our own society has by no means been immune from any of this, and for the first time in modern history we are forced to admit that the survival of liberal democracy itself can no longer be taken for granted.

There has never been a greater need for a committed and informed citizenry, and Canada’s Catholic institutions of higher education have an obligation, as Pope Francis reminds, to be at the forefront of a movement to humanize the next generation by inspiring the searching questions and enlightened discourses that

inform a robust democracy.

This challenge underscores the importance of the rich intellectual tradition in which Canadian Catholic higher education operates.

Enlivened by rigorous academic freedom, and proceeding on the assumption that each of us is made in the image and likeness of God, our institutions recognize that every person is characterized by an inherent dignity that deserves the utmost respect — including those we disagree with, those who come from different cultures, those who adhere to different religious and spiritual traditions or none.

In appreciating freedom of conscience by welcoming such diversity, we provide a scholarly forum for vigorous discussions and debates that model for our students the truth that civilized deliberations are the essence of a humane democracy.

The importance of what we do in Canadian Catholic higher education cannot be overestimated: there cannot be a free and vibrant society unless there is a free and well-informed populous within it. A free and vibrant society

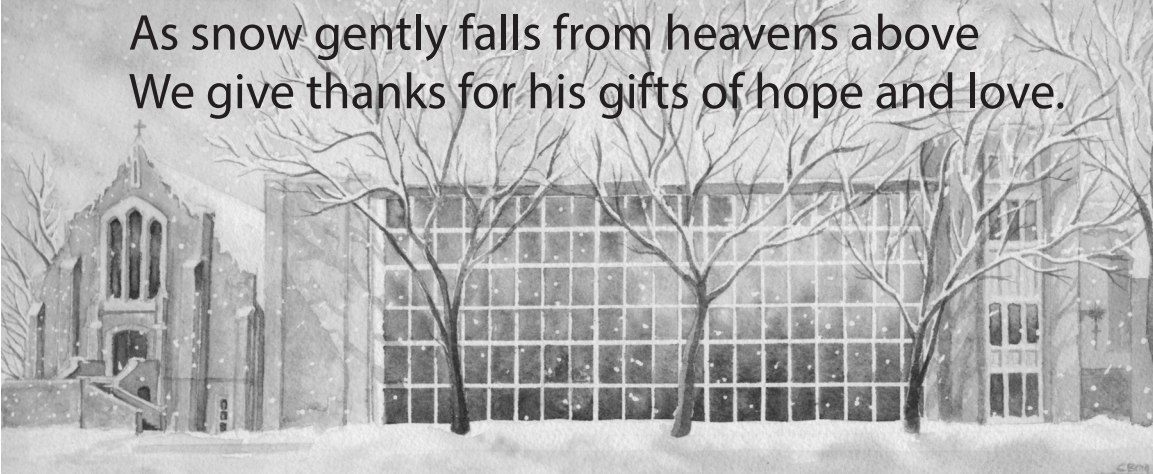
requires citizens whose sense of freedom is sustained by having thought seriously about the supreme questions of human life: what is justice; what is a fair distribution of power, of wealth? What constitutes ethical behaviour? What are our obligations as citizens; what are our responsibilities as a nation? What are reasonable limits on individual rights in a free and democratic society? How do we know what is truly good and beautiful; where do we stand in relation to the Divine?

These are questions that merit sustained and disciplined conversations in our classrooms, hallways and common rooms between students and teachers, students and students.


Such conversations are the hallmark of the Catholic intellectual tradition that celebrates academic freedom, scholarly discourse, rigorous research and spiritual awakening. It is this that empowers graduates to be well-informed, articulate and courageous participants in the increasing complex ethical and policy deliberations that an uncertain world and a vigorous democracy demand.

Aware of their rights and especially their responsibilities as citizens, graduates are equipped to envision and strive for a thoughtful and humane society, commensurate with the obligations inherent in the democratic freedoms we take too much for granted.

As snow gently falls from heavens above  
We give thanks for his gifts of hope and love.



Wishing you a Blessed Christmas and Happy New Year!



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“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign unto you; you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”  
Luke 2:11-12

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We extend to all the readers of the Prairie Messenger the wonderful tidings of Emmanuel. May you be blessed with the gifts of faith, hope and love, and the wisdom to share these gifts with all we meet in the New Year!



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# Internet forum reveals caring of complete strangers

## Around the Kitchen Table

Donald Ward



I was on an Internet forum the other night, connecting with a member from Bridgeport, Conn. I found her in the act of taking her own life.

“Don’t want to be here anymore” was her original post, then: “Last time I spoke to a friend she called 911 and I was in hospital for a week. I’m afraid to talk to anyone.”

“I have no one to talk to,” she went on. “Feeling so alone.”

Her final entry, which had been posted one minute previously, was: “I’m done.”

I responded immediately, trying to offer her some hope. She wrote nothing back. The silence was dreadful.

I posted a note on Facebook, briefly explaining the situation. “I’m going to mass in the morning,” I concluded. There was nothing else I could do.

“Oh, Daddy, how awful,” my daughter posted from England. “I’ll remember her in my prayers.”

“On our way to mass right now,” wrote a Facebook friend the following morning, “adding our prayers to yours.”

Time passed. I waited, the forum screen open on my laptop. There was no word from Connecticut. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, I was able to post the following message: “Thanks, guys. I just heard from her. She didn’t go through with it.”

“Thank goodness!” a friend

responded from Strathmore, Alta.

“Praise God,” my Facebook friend posted when her family returned from mass.

“Thank god,” wrote another friend, a putative atheist.

My godson responded from Toronto. I heard from colleagues, relatives, former employers, friends who had retired and moved to Victoria, fellow parishioners from long ago, and a woman I had first known as a 14-year-old girl in the resort village of Wakaw Lake.

There were responses, too, from North Carolina, Arizona, Scotland, Wales, Ohio, South Africa, and Missouri. None of these people could have known my friend in Connecticut. They were all moved to prayer — even the atheist — solely by compassion.

My Connecticut friend broke her night-long silence with a seemingly innocuous question: “How do you get a good night’s sleep?”

This explained much. The poor woman hadn’t had any meaningful sleep for four days.

A friend who suffers from chronic pain tells me that, after three days without sleep, your mind becomes unreliable, you can’t focus or concentrate, and the simplest tasks demand extraordinary effort. After four days, minor incidents assume epic proportions. Anxiety dominates, and if you are prone to depression to

begin with, you start to think the world would be better off without you.

My friend’s insomnia had become life-threatening. I wrote to Bridgeport: “When I was younger there was a prejudice against sleeping medication generally, and among doctors universally. Consequently, I spent much of my adolescence sleep-deprived, physically sick, confused, reprimanded for my lack of self-discipline, and ultimately convinced of the futility of human existence. A single sympathetic doctor would have changed my life profoundly.

“The situation today is not much different, unfortunately, but if you do some research you can take your findings to your doctor

and tell him — it’s nearly always still a “him” — what you need. He may be skeptical. He may disapprove. He may try to talk you out of it, for he’s convinced he knows better than you. You must be persistent. He doesn’t live in your body, and he has no real concept of what you’re going through.

“It’s not that there’s nothing available. On the contrary, pharmaceutical firms have gone out of their way to render us unconscious.”

I listed some medications I had either used myself or learned about through curiosity and research. There is a non-benzodiazepine hypnotic, for example, that leaves an unpleasant taste in your throat — but that’s the taste

of sleep. I told her about a sublingual medication that works so quickly that often you’re out cold before the tablet has dissolved.

“There are all kinds of reasons not to take sleeping pills,” I went on. “There is a danger of becoming dependent, and your body may develop a resistance. But right now the need for sleep is paramount. You’ll be in no condition to make rational decisions until you’ve had some.”

As Pope Francis said, albeit in a different context, “the wounds have first to be healed, then we can talk about everything else.”

“Sleep well, and you’ll wake up in a different world,” I concluded. “And by the way, merry Christmas.”



CNS/Dave Hrbacek, The Catholic Spirit

**LEGO GOES TO CHURCH** — Leopold Maas places the vested priest figure into his Lego mass scene in early September in the dining room of his home in St. Paul, Minn. His father, Stephen, created the Lego mass kit and sells it to families who wish to have a Catholic-themed Lego set.

# Lego kit brings mystery of mass into homes of families worldwide

By Kateri Schmidt

ST. PAUL, Minn. (CNS) — Stephen and Jennifer Maas’ family business, Domestic Church Supply Co., carries one product: a Lego kit that brings the mystery of the mass into the living rooms of families around the world.

“Father Leopold Celebrates Mass” began as a quirky passion project, but it has morphed into a popular and successful ministry for Stephen, 39, and Jennifer, 42, and their five home-schooled children. The oldest is 10-year-old Leopold, whom they call “Leo.”

It all began for these parishioners of Nativity of Our Lord in St. Paul during the search for Leo’s first communion present. Among the standard rosaries, devotionals and holy cards, nothing seemed likely to excite their young son.

What they wanted was a Lego kit that Leo — an avid Lego fan

— could use to act out the mass. There was just one problem: It didn’t exist. “So,” said Stephen, “that got me thinking: How come there’s no priest in Legoland?”

That question launched a year-and-a-half-long process of “tinkering.” Stephen raided his son’s Lego bins and began fiddling with different brick combinations. Leo’s first communion came and went as Stephen continued to test out miniature altars and ambos, going through eight or nine versions of a Lego tabernacle.

Wanting the set to be as complete as possible, Stephen found someone who could print a white collar onto a black-clothed Lego figurine and gold etching onto Lego “books” to create a lectionary and Roman Missal.

For the vestments, he began roaming through fabric stores searching for a lightweight material that would lie flat on the small figure. He finally settled on Nike athletic fabric, laser-cut for the purpose.

The whole family got involved, taking notes whenever they visited a new church. The kids and their friends acted as consultants, testing out an early

version of the instruction manual.

The Maases knew that they wanted to share the product they were creating with others, so as they tinkered, they began asking a crucial question: Would it sell? They researched potential copyright issues and discovered that, according to the first-sales doctrine, once a product has been purchased, the original creators have no say in what happens to it.

They took the plunge.

Stephen ordered supplies from BrickLink, an online store where Lego enthusiasts can buy huge quantities of bricks in specific sizes, shapes and colours from collectors around the world. He and Jennifer got to work assembling the kits each night after the kids went to bed.

The product launched at the Minnesota Catholic Homeschool Conference in May 2015. Word spread on social media. Soon, Catholic bookstores across the United States and the United Kingdom, including the online store Holy Heroes, began requesting their product.

Laurie Murphy, a former employee of St. Patrick’s Guild in St. Paul, says it was one of their

biggest sellers. Orders also are taken at the Maas’ website, DomesticChurchSupply.com.

“It’s really grown itself,” Stephen told The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. He and Jennifer now hire an employee to assemble the kits in an outbuilding behind their house. Due to the cost of bricks and the time needed for assembly, the finished sets cost \$49.99.

Stephen’s previous work as a graphic designer means that each finished kit looks entirely professional, down to a beautifully photographed box and glossy instruction manual, neither of which bear the Lego logo). The kits contain 174 genuine Lego bricks. They include three modified bricks, for the collar, lectionary and Roman Missal, plus four vestments — in green, white, purple and red.

But it’s the innovative details that make the product stand out.

That cross atop the tabernacle? In typical Lego sets, it serves as old-fashioned wheel spokes. Those graceful candlesticks? Made with tiny Lego telescopes. In addition to the tabernacle,

altar, ambo, presider’s chair and credence table, there are cruets, a lavabo dish, a paten with hosts, a chalice, candles and a sanctuary lamp. A tiny “bone” serves as a saint’s relic inside the altar.

The name “Father Leopold” is inspired by St. Leopold Mandic, a 5-foot-4-inch Croatian priest and renowned confessor — and Leo Maas’ namesake.

Stephen and Jennifer have one goal in mind for their little business: to normalize the faith for children.

“We intended this to be primarily evangelistic in nature,” Stephen said. “Our goal was to get boys to bring their Lego Batman to (play) mass.”

Father Leopold seeks to demystify the rituals of the faith, showing kids that the mass and the priesthood are integral parts of everyday life.

The sets’ fans have more to look forward to. The Maases plan to launch a confessional set in the spring of 2018, and they also are expecting to design a line of saint, pope and bishop mini-figures sometime in the future.

One thing is clear: Legoland will never be the same.

Schmidt writes for The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.



## The heavens amaze us

The birth of Christ has always been associated with the heavens.

In the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel appears to Zachariah and then to Mary, to announce a miraculous birth. Later, a host of angels appears to shepherds abiding in the fields, announcing the birth of the Messiah.

In the Gospel of Matthew, an angel twice appears to Joseph in his sleep. Then the wise men are guided by a star, bringing them to Bethlehem.

These heavenly images have been the staple of Christmas scenes for ages. They appeal to both our senses and our emotions as we celebrate the birth of our saviour and king.

One wonders what heavenly images might be used in a more scientific and secular age to describe the long-awaited birth of a messiah.

I recently saw a picture of our galaxy. In the infinite swirl of stars, a small area was circled — infinitesimally small, it seemed. The caption noted that this is the area of our galaxy that we can see with the naked eye on any night.

With the aid of the Hubble telescope, however, we can peer much farther into the universe. The resultant images are incredible, the vastness of the universe unbelievable. While our own galaxy has billions of stars, of which we can see only a fraction, the Hubble telescope has discovered billions more galaxies — and each one contains billions of stars.

We are unable to count that high, or even to imagine it.

While science is not able to explain the mysteries of faith — such as the Nativity of Jesus — it has enabled us to grow in wonder and admiration of things unseen and unimagined by our ancestors.

To return to that little blob circled in our galaxy, it is amazing to think that, in the vastness of space, it is in that small circle that God chose to reveal the fullness of his love and grace. It is here he chose to send his Son.

We marvel at how scientists can pinpoint a landing on the moon or even an asteroid. But 2,000 years ago God made a pinpoint landing among us, in the Holy Land. Jesus walked on this earth. Later, the Bible describes him ascending into heaven, into the vastness of space, hidden by a cloud.

The heavens form a magnificent backdrop for the Christmas story. The infinite vault of the sky engages our imagination as nothing else can. As we look heavenward on a starry night this Christmas, we have more reason than ever to be amazed at the mystery we are celebrating. — PWN

## Two events in October and November don’t align with church teaching

### Soul Mending

Yvonne A. Zarowny



*“Forgive them for they know not what they do . . . .”*  
— Luke 23:34

*“In order to overcome the misguided mechanisms — and replace them with new ones which will be more just and in conformity with the common good of humanity — an effective political will is needed. Unfortunately, after analyzing the situation, we have to conclude that this political will have been insufficient” (35).*  
— St. John Paul, 1987 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Concern of the Church for the Social Order)

Compared to St. John Paul II, Pope Francis has been mild in his criticism of capitalism, particularly the version of “free enterprise” practiced in the U.S.

Were you aware of that? Most people are not, including our bishops, priests, and religious educators.

I return to that in my next column as this was supposed to be a letter. Here I outline two developments that occurred in October and November 2017.

While increasing the challenge of our using our power to transform our cultures of death into a variety of *actual* sustainable cultures of life, what they reveal gives us a slim fighting chance.

And isn’t that what we celebrate this time of year: the birthing anew of light into darkness, of the Prince of Peace in our hearts and our world, of Immanuel — “God with us” — the birthing anew of hope that we can actually realize God’s dream for us as through grace we co-create societies where all God’s creation has life with dignity.

For us to have an actual *functioning* democracy as well as the freedom to choose according to our values, hopes and dreams — never mind our *actual* church teachings — we need good accurate information. We also need to know what our *actual* official teachings are, particularly our

social doctrine.

Currently we have precious little of either in our communities and parishes and, in most cases, it is *not* the fault of our priests, religious educators, popes or bishops. It is actually part of a very brilliant, if unconscionable, decades-long stealth campaign to prevent us from being politically effective in transforming our cultures.

It has to be a stealth or covert campaign because most of us would be making different choices *if* we actually knew what was going on and our *actual* social doctrine.

With an infusion of \$650 million from Koch Equity Development (KED), the investment arm of the “libertarian-when-it-suits-them” multi-billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch, Meredith Corp. bought the media conglomerate Time, Inc. in November 2017.

Although their spokespeople say it is strictly an investment decision, as documented in Jane Mayer’s 2016 *Dark Money* and Nancy MacLean’s 2017 *Democracy In Chains*, the Kochs do little that does not advance their self-serving version of “libertarianism.”

This is putting life on earth at risk while denying millions life — never mind life with dignity as required by our church doctrine.

As Mayer, MacLean, Thomas Frank, David Sassoon and numerous others have meticulously documented, there is no bar of integrity below which this tiny group of super-rich will not go.

This includes funding disinformation/misinformation campaigns around the world about the causes of climate chaos, terrorism and wars, as well as backing racist political candidates.

It also includes their “charitable gifts” of millions to over 100 business and economics schools

throughout the United States — including Washington’s Catholic University of America’s (CUA) Tim and Steph Busch School of Business and Economics.

Charles Koch is an example of someone who has intentionally

— U.S. BISHOPS, page 23

## Hanukkah and Christmas share significant links

By Rabbi A. James Rudin  
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Hanukkah, which began Tuesday evening (Dec. 12), has been incorrectly called the “Jewish Christmas” because both holidays emphasize light and take place during the darkest days of winter.

While the two festivals are very different in message and obser-

vance, there are, however, some significant links between Hanukkah and Christmas. The New Testament records that Jesus, like other Jews of his time, celebrated the eight days of Hanukkah: “It was the feast of the Dedication at Jerusalem; it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon” (Jn 10:22-23). The Hebrew word “Hanukkah” means “Dedication.”

If Charles Dickens had written about Hanukkah in a manner similar to his *A Christmas Carol*, the famous English author would have noted that special prayers are recited in Jewish homes each night of the holiday as young (and not so young) children light colourful candles in a candelabrum or menorah. Dickens would surely describe in loving detail the unmistakable aroma and taste of the two traditional holiday treats: potato pancakes fried in oil and loaded with calories and cholesterol, along with small jelly doughnuts that rapidly raise a person’s blood sugar level. Gifts are exchanged among family members and friends and a series of well-known songs are sung that are especially beloved by adults — including me — because they evoke warm joyous childhood memories of Hanukkahs long past.

That’s how the holiday is celebrated today.

But the warm and fuzzy aspects of the festival frequently obscure the darker historical side of Hanukkah. The holiday commemorates the military struggle in the land of Israel between 168-165 BC when Judah Maccabee’s small number of Jewish guerrillas defeated the much larger and better-armed Greco-Syrian army of Emperor Antiochus IV, a brutal ruler who reigned over part of Alexander the Great’s former empire.

Antiochus was no champion of



CNS/Sivaram V, Reuters

A critical educator, writer and engaged citizen living in Qualicum Beach, B.C., Zarowny is also on the leadership team for her parish’s Justice and Life Ministry.

**TYPHOON CAUSES DAMAGE IN INDIA** — Residents carry their belongings as they evacuate their home Dec. 2 after flooding caused by Typhoon Ockhi in the coastal village of Chellanam in the southern state of Kerala, India. The storm claimed the lives of at least 32 poor Catholic fishermen who were at sea and 200 more were missing.

— STRUGGLE, page 22



Christians will have to overcome denominational bias

**The Editor:** In an article from the *Prairie Messenger* on ecumenism, Dr. Jason West said that it is “clear that ecumenism is a daily task in which all Roman Catholics are engaged in a variety of ways.” West warns that ecumenical dialogues are not fruitful if begun from the assumption that Catholicism has the fullness of truth and the means of salvation, and that whatever small share our partners might have in these really comes from the Catholic Church.

In *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II raises and legitimizes the question of reform and change in the papal office. He calls for widespread discussion on how reform

could be brought about and the shape it could take. *Ut Unum Sint* calls for *unity in legitimate diversity*. It takes wisdom and a *receptivity of respect* to be willing to accept the paradox of being fully committed to Catholicism yet open to accept other denominations on an equal basis. West says that an important requirement for ecumenism is the conviction that Catholics can learn from non-Catholic Christians.

For unity to happen, Christians will have to overcome *denominational bias*, which is an enhanced view of one’s own denomination and may have accompanying negative thoughts about other de-

nominations. An attitude of God-is-on-our-side certainty closes off rather than encourages open dialogue. Open-ended conversation has the potential to become the antidote to intra-Christian separation.

West writes: “Genuine ecumenical engagement should lead us to become more fully immersed in our own faith, not less, for only if each is committed to their faith and genuinely interested in learning and living the truth come what may, can true dialogue occur. Only then can we hope to realize Jesus’ wish ‘that they may all be one.’ ” — **David Lidster, Kamloops, B.C.**

Koch network has educated U.S. bishops

Continued from page 22

engineered what St. John Paul II in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Concern of the Church for the Social Order) calls “structures of sin” (36) and of committing “real forms of idolatry” through the worship of “money, ideology, class and technology” (37).

Yet, in October 2017, at CUA “Good Profit and Catholic Social Doctrine” Conference, Charles Koch gave one of the keynotes.

According to Tom Roberts’ article, “Koch, Turkson speak at Catholic University’s ‘Good Profit’ conference,” Tim Busch, himself a multi-millionaire and part of the Koch network, boasted “they” have educated over half of the bishops in the U.S.

Of the differences between

what Koch presented and Cardinal Turkson, who was presenting what our actual social doctrine is, Busch stated: “We have to discern and reconcile; we have to listen to both sides.”

Why should Canadian Catholics or anyone else care?

These folks are directly and indirectly educating our bishops, priests and us about what constitutes “pro-life” and our actual social doctrine — particularly that of St. John Paul II.

Corporations that are subsidiaries of the Koch Industrial Empire are also significant investors in Canada’s oilsands, pipelines, the highly toxic chemicals needed to get the bitumen to flow, the refineries that process the diluted bitumen, developers of the steam method for extracting

the tar that actually destroys water, the Fraser Institute, Cardus and much more.

Also, we the Canadian taxpayers provide them with so much in subsidies that the International Monetary Fund is actually worried.

Not lobbying, not buying politicians, not lying and not accepting subsidies or tax incentives are all part of the “Big Lie” promoted by Koch *et al* about their “Good Profit” and “Principled Entrepreneurship.”

As documented by the investigative journalists mentioned above, they do all this and much more.

Aren’t you glad it is Christmas! Now that we know, there is hope we can stop crucifying Jesus through our structural/social sins! Hallelujah!

Struggle for liberty still relevant today

Continued from page 21

religious liberty and diversity. In his zeal for total control of his vast realm, he prohibited the study of Torah, ritual circumcision, kosher dietary laws, Sabbath observance and the practice of Judaism itself. An ancient historian detailed Antiochus’ cruelty:

“The Books of the Torah which the men of Antiochus found, they tore into pieces and burned. Wherever a book of the covenant was found in anyone’s possession, or if anyone respected the Torah, the decree of the king imposed the sentence of death upon him. Month after month, they dealt brutally with every Jew who was found in the cities . . . In accordance with the decree, they put to death the women who had circumcised their children, hanging the newborn babies around their necks; and they also put to death their families as well as those who had circumcised them.”

When Judah’s forces recaptured Jerusalem, they demolished

the statues of Zeus and other idolatrous symbols Antiochus had placed inside the Holy Temple, and rededicated the Temple to the service of God. Judah’s victory of “the few over the many” has earned him his own statue at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point where he stands alongside other great military leaders.

Jewish tradition teaches that the small quantity of olive oil that Judah found was insufficient to fuel the Temple’s eternal light beyond one day, but somehow the precious oil lasted eight days; an event described as the “miracle” of Hanukkah.

Many historians agree that Hanukkah represents an early struggle for what we today call “religious liberty” or “freedom of conscience.” The holiday is an annual reminder that every faith community has the right to maintain its diverse customs, ceremonies, and teachings, and no ruler, government, or regime has the right to dictate what people can and cannot believe.

Hanukkah’s message remains

as relevant as it was more than 2,100 years ago. Today there are forced religious conversions involving kidnapped young children, beheadings based upon one’s religious identity and numerous bloody “religious wars” raging in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and other parts of the world.

Finally, without the Maccabees’ victory and the preservation of Jewish religious life in ancient Israel, Christianity may not have emerged 200 years later with its taproots deeply embedded within Judaism. The only Scripture Jesus knew was, of course, the Torah the malevolent Antiochus wanted to obliterate. The Jewish Holy Temple in Jerusalem mentioned in the New Testament was saved from desecration and rededicated to God 150 years before Jesus was born.

As Jews and Christians celebrate our distinctive festivals of faith and light, it is “altogether fitting and proper” that both communities remember Judah Maccabee’s long ago victory over the forces of darkness, despotism and death.



Janice Weber

Christmas

It is a wintry night in the West.  
The beacons of democracy  
on the distant hills have dimmed.  
We huddle around our broken compasses,  
our supplies dwindling.  
The trail to our homeland  
has been lost;  
the darkness deepens.

Above the cold palaces  
of empty distractions roam  
the soul of the world  
and the soul of God,  
while many other souls  
wander with the madness  
of untethered freedom.

Yet, deep in the bedrock  
of given meaning,  
layer by layer,  
story by story,  
year by year,  
down deep is found  
the most curious birth,  
when fire touched  
our world with  
a child most  
holy and most  
troubling.

By Michael Dallaire

PM has been a progressive paper

**The Editor:** Thank you and all those who have worked to publish the *Prairie Messenger* over the years. We greatly appreciate all your efforts to bring important and interesting stories into our home each week.

Your progressive and uplifting paper has been an inspiration and source of hope to us in what have been some disappointing times

following the initial hopeful expectations generated by the Second Vatican Council.

We will miss the *PM* very much. If there is any way publication can continue, even in a smaller perhaps “online” format, I am certain it would be much appreciated by many of your loyal subscribers.

— **Robert and Leona Donnan, Tisdale, Sask.**

Letters to the editor

We welcome your response to articles published in the *Prairie Messenger*. Two-way communication assures everyone of a better exposure to the truth.

We cannot publish any letters to the editor unless you give us your full name, your address and your telephone number. *(It is especially important to remember this if you are sending your comments by email).*

Due to limited space we ask you to keep your letters short — 300 to 350 words maximum. The *Prairie Messenger* reserves the right to edit letters to conform to space requirements and newspaper style.

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# Mideast religious leaders oppose Trump’s move

By Judith Sudilovsky

JERUSALEM (CNS) — In an open letter to U.S. President Donald Trump, Christian leaders in Jerusalem said U.S. recognition of the city as the capital of Israel could have dire regional consequences.

“We have been following, with concern, the reports about the possibility of changing how the United States understands and deals with the status of Jerusalem. We are certain that such steps will yield increased hatred, conflict, violence and suffering in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, moving us farther from the goal of unity and deeper toward destructive division,” the Christian leaders

said, just hours before Trump announced the U.S. was recognizing Jerusalem as the capital and relocating the U.S. embassy.

They appealed to Trump to take their viewpoint into consideration, as did the leaders who met at Camp David in July 2000 to decide the status of Jerusalem. The Christian leaders said their “solemn advice and plea” for the president was to continue recognizing the international status of Jerusalem.

“We ask you, Mr. President, to help us all walk toward more love and a definitive peace, which cannot be reached without Jerusalem being for all,” they said Dec. 6.

“Any sudden changes would cause irreparable harm. We are confident that, with strong sup-

port from our friends, Israelis and Palestinians can work toward negotiating a sustainable and just peace, benefiting all who long for the Holy City of Jerusalem to fulfill its destiny.”

The Christian leaders, who include Catholic and Orthodox patriarchs as well as the Franciscan custos of the Holy Land, said Jerusalem could be “shared and fully enjoyed” once a political process helped “liberate the hearts of all people that live within it from the conditions of conflict and destructiveness that they are experiencing.”

With Christmas approaching they asked that Jerusalem “not be deprived” of peace; they wished Trump a Merry Christmas and asked that he help them “listen to the song of the angels.”



CNS/Debbie Hill



CNS/L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters

**POPE MEETS PALESTINIAN LEADER — Pope Francis shakes hands with Mahmoud Al-Habbash, Palestinian minister of religious affairs, during a private meeting Dec. 6 at the Vatican. Pope Francis expressed his concern that a move to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel would further destabilize the Middle East.**

“As the Christian leaders of Jerusalem, we invite you to walk with us in hope as we build a just, inclusive peace for all the peoples of this unique and Holy City,” they said.

In 1967, Israel annexed East Jerusalem, which had been under Jordanian control since 1948. In 1980 Israel declared a united Jerusalem as its capital. Palestinians see East Jerusalem as the future capital of an independent Palestine.

Earlier Dec. 6, Pope Francis expressed concern that a U.S. move recognizing Jerusalem as the capital would further destabilize the Middle East.

The internationally unsettled status of Jerusalem and its central importance to Jews, Muslims and Christians explains why, while rec-

**CONTROVERSY OVER JERUSALEM — The gold-covered Dome of the Rock at the Temple Mount complex is seen in this overview of Jerusalem’s Old City Dec. 6. In an open letter to U.S. President Donald Trump, Christian leaders in Jerusalem said U.S. recognition of the city as the capital of Israel could have dire regional consequences.**

ognizing the state of Israel, no nation has its embassy in the holy city. Since the early 1990s, the Vatican has called for a special status for the city. It has insisted the political question of the city’s status must be the result of negotiation.

In Lebanon, Abdul Latif Derian, grand mufti of Lebanon’s Sunni Muslims, called on Arab Islamic leaders to counter the U.S. embassy’s relocation to preserve the Arab identity of Jerusalem. The mufti is an important figure for Sunni Muslims, not just locally but regionally. Most of the Palestinian population in

the region is Sunni Muslim.

“The transfer of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and the recognition of the Holy City as the capital of Israel is a blatant challenge and provocation to the feelings of Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims,” the mufti said in a statement Dec. 6. “This step would turn the region into a flame of conflicts that will inevitably lead to disastrous consequences and would adversely affect the region and the international community. This will have serious repercussions on the Arab and Islamic region.”

# Nuns’ music program designed to keep Venezuelan youth clean

By Hildegard Willer

BARQUISIMETO, Venezuela (CNS) — Carlos Etcheray made two wooden sticks dance over the drum as if he had done it all his life. The 13-year-old’s face broke into a grin as he played a gaita, the quick, cheerful rhythm that resounds throughout Venezuela’s streets during the Christmas season.

For the past two years, Carlos has been part of the musical program *Latidos*, Spanish for “Beats.” Six members of the group were playing at a Christmas party at a school beside a playground in Barquisimeto. They played and sang salsa, merengue, gaita and other South American rhythms so joyfully contagious that some of their listeners started dancing.

The most enthusiastic singer was a woman of about 50 with gray curls: Medical Mission Sister Maigualida Riera, founder of the *Latidos* program at Jesus of Nazareth Parish in Barquisimeto, Venezuela’s fourth-largest city. Her neighbourhood, *La Carrucienha*, is one of the most violent in Barquisimeto. Theft, assaults and even murders are part of life in *La Carrucienha*. Riera thought music could get kids off the street

and show them a different path.

The program began with just a few instruments and the support of some music teachers in the community, but it grew quickly.

“Now there are nearly 80 people, including children, teens and teachers,” said Riera, who notes, “music has always been a cornerstone of life.”

Carlos remembers the day two years ago when he knew he wanted to be a drummer.

“I came home from school and followed the kids who were going to the parish. I saw they were playing music,” he said.

Ever since, Carlos has gotten up early on Saturdays so he can be at the church at 8 a.m. for percussion classes and to rehearse with *Latidos*. Music, he said, has helped him deal with the harsh reality he has faced in his short life. Four years ago, his father was murdered — stabbed six times — as he returned home from work.

Juan Pablo Alvarez, 12, is the group’s soloist. Besides singing, he also plays the keyboard, and he is so enthusiastic that he says he would “like to play music all the time.”

Music has always been important in Venezuelan culture. Many

people play the *cuatro*, a four-stringed guitar, or participate in the music groups that spring up during the Christmas season in neighbourhoods, schools and universities. For decades, the government invested in a public music education system of youth orchestras that gained world renown. During the current economic crisis, with runaway inflation, that system has crumbled.

“They no longer pay the teach-

ers,” said Sujei Caldera, a music teacher and current president of the *Latidos* Foundation. For *Latidos*, that has been a blessing, she added. “In our program, we have many well-trained teachers who have come from that system.”

As Christmas approaches, people face not only daily violence, but also hunger. The minimum monthly wage does not stretch to cover food for a week. Prices rise daily, and parents skip meals so they can feed

their children. The Medical Mission Sisters’ soup kitchen provides 150 lunches a day, but that aid is only a drop in the sea of needs.

Just as gaitas fill the air during Christmas in Venezuela, hallacas are traditionally found on every table. Hallacas are a corn pastry filled with a stew of meat, raisins, eggs and olives and wrapped in banana leaves. Families traditionally prepare large quantities to give to relatives and friends.

“I’m afraid that this Christmas, there won’t be hallacas on every table,” Riera said. Nor will there be gifts or new clothes, as usual on Christmas. “Many families will have to choose between food or new shoes — there’s not enough in their pockets for both.”

In times of crisis and great stress, listening to or playing music brings renewal.

Riera said “200 or 300 people come to our concerts, and afterward they tell us, ‘We came without having eaten, but now we’re going away content.’ ”

“Music is part of our culture,” she said. “It’s a way of saying, ‘No, we’re going to keep going — a God of joy goes before us.’ That’s why we started the *Latidos* program.”

The youngest member of the group, six-year-old Jesus Ignacio, plays the guiro and the guitar. He describes the meaning of those beats from which *Latidos* takes its name: “They are the beats of the heart and of friendship.”



CNS/Hildegard Willer

**CHRISTMAS MUSIC IN VENEZUELA — Carlos Etcheray, 13, performs with the band *Latidos* in Barquisimeto, Venezuela. His father was murdered four years ago.**

Hospitality is the practice that keeps the church from becoming a club, a members-only society.

— Diana Butler Bass