



Volume 4/Issue 10 - Christmas 2019

# The Family Apostolate

Where Faith and Family Meet

Grace  
Incarnation  
Family  
Trust  
Serenity



# GIFTS



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The Family Apostolate provides pastoral care, promotes the critical need for family prayer and regular reception of the sacraments, imparts catechesis, offers opportunities for family get-togethers, and builds bridges between individual families and the larger church community. Through offering diverse spiritual and psychological resources, the Family Apostolate seeks to bring the merciful presence of Christ to families in an increasingly difficult world.



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The FA sponsors special events throughout the year such as retreats, healing masses and group celebrations. Our prayer teams also pray for your special needs and requests. For more information, contact Patti Sadler - [pattisadler7@gmail.com](mailto:pattisadler7@gmail.com)



Christ the King Spiritual Night of Reflection



Christ the King Spiritual Night of Reflection



Home blessing for Besnik and Crisanne on December 1st, 2019.



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# Editorial

## *Just another Christmas?*

**L**aura Story wrote a Christmas song called *Just Another Christmas*. The lyrics are poignant. *"Get out the lights, put up the tree, same old stockings, same routine. Busy sidewalks, crowded stores, somehow I've forgotten what it's all for."* The busyness of Christmas can be draining. To celebrate the true gift of Emmanuel means encountering in one another God, who is with us. In the infant Jesus, God donned human flesh with all its poverty and wretchedness. The privilege is that Christ offered himself for our sake that we might become like him. Hence, Christmas echoes the chance to participate in a holy, divine life, because Christ dwells within us. Christ should not disappear after Christmas, rather should possess our entire life.

Something prominent about Christmas is the exchanging of gifts. We enthusiastically look forward to either giving gifts or receiving them from loved ones. It tops both the Christmas checklist and stress-list, often without considering the spiritual significance. We give gifts to those we cherish. We give gifts to friends. We give gifts to family members. That's not strange. What *is* strange is how much we fail to recognize that we are gifts to each other and that the unique presence of each loved one is irreplaceable. This fact often escapes us. When gifts become devoid of this essential understanding, gift exchanging becomes more like pagan revelry than the celebration of Emmanuel, God with us. Hence, another tired Christmas!

In this Christmas edition, the Family Apostolate focuses on the meaning of GIFTS. From Christianity's perspective, we ponder the gifts of the Three Wise Men, the Magi, who gave meaningful gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the infant Jesus. Gold for his kingship, frankincense for his divinity and myrrh for his sacrificial death. The Magi devoutly offered themselves by their long, sacrificial procession which eventually greeted the Infant-King and Priest-Messiah, Jesus. Divine Love is GIFT-ed with human love from the Wise Men.

One of my favorite Christmas songs is this: *"God rest ye merry gentlemen. Let nothing you dismay. Remember Christ our Savior. Was born on Christmas Day. To save us all from Satan's pow'r. When we were gone astray. Oh, tidings of comfort and joy. Comfort and joy. Oh, tidings of comfort and joy."* Yes, the tidings of comfort and joy are the meaning of the gift of Christ. We might need to think deeper about how we can be gifts rather than how we can package gifts to others, more about the process of preparing for Christmas than the content. Does my Christmas begin with Advent or focus on December 25th? Is my life a spectrum of gifts to others or am I consumed by the parties and materialism of the Christmas period only? How can we become gifts, tidings of comfort and joy to others during the period of Christmas?

The FA presents our readers with the acronym: G-race, I-ncarnation, F-amily, T-rust, and S-erenity. Christmas brings God's grace to us. The Incarnate Son of God transforms us into one Family of joy. We become Trusting; special GIFTS not only to friends or family members but to those in need, the poor and the hungry of the society. Christ says, "And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full." (Lk. 6:34) So, the question remains, "Is this just another Christmas?"



*V. Arisukwu*





G

# Christmas is about Grace

Fr. Michael DeAscanis

Christmas is about grace. Jesus came to earth and was born in Bethlehem to give us better access to grace. He made God accessible to us; He WAS God. The baby in the manger was God. As St. John tells us in his Gospel, "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. . . . The law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:14, 16-17)

Some think God looks down at us on earth as if we were a science experiment, or like an ant farm. They think that He is disinterested in us. The good news of our faith is that God is indeed interested in us, so interested that He came down to live among us. For thirty-three years, He walked among us on earth. He desired not only to live next to us, but also to live within us. He wants to influence our lives now on earth and after death into eternity. We are made by Him, and for Him, out of love.

What is grace, then? Grace is the presence of the Holy Spirit of God in our souls. God exists outside of us. He is the Creator, and we are the creatures. But He desires to connect with us, to enter into our soul. His spirit (the Holy Spirit) desires to enter our soul and live within us. St Paul writes, "God's Love has been poured into

our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Romans 5:5) When the Holy Spirit is in our soul, we say that we are in a state of grace. God is living in us; we participate in His life. His goodness and wisdom rub off on us. Our soul and His spirit are united and mingle together. He changes our desires, our thoughts, our attitudes, and our priorities. We become like Him. We bear Him in our souls. God became man so that man could become like God.

When the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to ask if she would be the mother of God, he said, "Hail, full of grace." At the moment Mary said yes, she was full of grace; she was full of God. She had conceived Jesus in her womb, God who took on a human nature in her. God was in her body as well as in her soul. God desires to live in our soul, too.

How do we get grace? How do we receive the Holy Spirit? We receive grace whenever we pray. The main goal of prayer is to commune with God, to invite His Spirit within us. A special form of prayer that conveys grace is the Sacraments. The Sacraments are seven ways of praying that Jesus taught us. Each gives us grace, the Holy Spirit in our soul, though each affects us differently.

Some grace is referred to as habitual. It is like a habit; it becomes an enduring part of

us. It is as if it were seared into our soul. Grace from the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation and Matrimony has a lasting effect; our soul remembers the encounter with God and so is inclined to goodness. Even if the person later turns away from God in serious sin, they are more likely to eventually turn back than if they did not have those sacramental graces. There is another type of grace referred to as actual grace. Each time we receive the Sacraments of Communion and Confession we receive a new experience of God, a fresh dose of grace. Each time we pray we receive grace, the Holy Spirit in our soul. These are moments of actual grace. Experience shows that the effect of grace

seems to wear off. As humans, we have short memories. We can be inspired by a good experience today but forget it tomorrow. We are fickle and easily distracted. So we must seek grace over and over again.

Jesus taught us to ask for our "daily bread", not our weekly or monthly or annual bread. In fact, just as we give strength to our bodies by eating three meals a day, it is recommended that we pray three times a day to strengthen our souls. Three times a day, invite the Holy Spirit into your soul.

6:56) He desires to live inside us. Christmas day prefigures Holy Thursday.

At least one day a week, on Sundays, flood your soul with grace by consuming Jesus in Holy Communion. Receive His power and wisdom and goodness within you. It seems that some people are "greedy" for grace. They attend Mass every day, seeking an intimate encounter with Jesus daily. Perhaps they have learned something others haven't? If Holy Communion is Jesus, don't be content with once a week. Get "greedy" for God yourself!

save us without us. We must cooperate with grace, seek it, accept it, and respond to it. Ask for it humbly. Scripture teaches us that "to the humble, God gives grace." (James 4:6)

The day of Jesus' birth is called Christmas. This is not a coincidence. It is an old English word comprised of two words, *Christ* and *Mass*. It is Christ's Mass. Mass is the prayer in which Jesus becomes visible in the Holy Eucharist. At the first Christmas, He became visible when He was born and laid in the manger. At every Christmas since then, He becomes visible in the



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Three times a day, ask God for grace.

This brings us back to Christmas. Jesus came to be consumed by us, to enter into us. On His first day visible on earth, Christmas day, He was born in a stable and laid in a manger. A manger is where animals come to eat. The word "manger" comes from the Italian word *mangiare*, meaning to eat. He was born in Bethlehem, a Hebrew name meaning "house of bread." On His last day on earth, Holy Thursday, the night before He died, He changed bread into His body, the Holy Eucharist, and told us to eat it. He called Himself the "bread of life." He said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." (John

Those who have addictions and who participate in 12-step programs are told that they have to rely on the "higher power" of God. They need God's strength to break their addiction, since their own strength is insufficient. Well, Catholics eat the higher power. We eat God in Holy Communion, bringing His power within us. There is no more direct access to grace and God's power. *God continually offers grace to us, but we have to choose to receive it. God created us without us, but He did not will to*

consecrated host at Mass. And we receive Him and receive grace. At Christmas Mass, we don't just remember Bethlehem; in a very real sense we are there too, adoring Jesus with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and magi. In the words of the Christmas carol, "O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord." We come to adore Jesus in the Holy Eucharist and relish the opportunity to receive His grace at Christmas.



Fr. Michael DeAscanis is a priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, ordained in 2004. His seminary studies specialized in bioethics and medical ethics. He currently serves as pastor of St. Philip Neri and St. Clement parishes. He also serves as chaplain of the Catholic Medical Association in Baltimore, giving spiritual and ethical support to physicians and medical students. Fr. DeAscanis writes for the FA Magazine on Theology and the Sacraments





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# Christmas Gifts

– what are we giving – authentic giving

Fr. Larry Adamczyk

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**B**e honest. How many Christmas presents have you exchanged or re-gifted? One year, my sister got a new digital TV for Christmas and while we were watching it, on Christmas night, there was a commercial with a yellow happy face but with a frown and the caption with something about 60% off the things you really wanted for Christmas. Do we ever really get what we truly want for Christmas? Only someone who really knows you, can give you a present that you really like. The only person who truly knows our deep desires, wants, and needs is God. God gives us the best present of all. God gives us His very self in Jesus Christ. Jesus is our Christmas present from God. If Jesus is God's Christmas present to us, what is our present to God? What can we give to God that He does not already have? The only thing that we have, that is truly our own, are our sins. This is the only thing that is truly ours, and this is the only thing that God truly desires: that we give up our sins and love Him with all our heart, mind, and soul. Jesus came to free us from our sins. Jesus

came to bring us eternal life. Jesus came to reveal the love of God the Father for us. Sitting around the dinner table, somebody may ask, "Does anybody need anything?" I sometimes respond, "Salvation?" That is

the only gift we really need. And salvation is just that it is a gift. We do nothing to earn it or deserve it. As St. John Chrysostom wrote many centuries ago<sup>[1]</sup>

*"We must learn to be discerning Christians and to honor Christ in the way in which He wants to be honored. It is only right that honor given to anyone should take the form most acceptable to the recipient not the giver. Peter thought he was honoring the Lord when he tried to stop Him from washing his feet, but this was far from being genuine homage. So, give God the honor He asks for, that is give your money generously to the poor. God has no need of golden vessels but of golden hearts. I am not saying that you should not give golden altar vessels and so on, but I am insisting that nothing can take the place of almsgiving. The Lord will not refuse to accept the first kind of gift but He prefers the second, and quite naturally, because in the first case only the donor benefits, in the second case the poor get the benefit. The gift of the chalice may be ostentatious; almsgiving is pure benevolence."*



I was talking to someone once and they were commenting that if the Three Wise Men, had been women, the gifts that they brought would have been more practical—a sack of diapers, a casserole, and offer to babysit. The three wise men, however, may have known the ancient Hebrew prophecies of the coming Messiah from the time that the Israelites had spent in exile in Babylon. The prophet Daniel held a high position in the court of the Babylonian king and prophesied the coming of the Messiah. So, the wise men were wise enough to bring gifts that signified their knowledge of who Jesus was. A gift is simply that; something we do not have a right to; something that is given to us out of generosity and kindness of someone else. In that respect then, when the Gospel says the Magi “opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh,” they were not really gifts since, as God, everything belongs, by right, to Him. The Magi were only giving to God what was His due. They gave Him gold in homage because Jesus is the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords. They gave Him frankincense in adoration because Jesus is God from God, Light from Light, and true God from True God. They gave Him myrrh for His burial because Jesus who was born of the Virgin Mary, would suffer, die, and be buried, and on the third day rise again. What if Mary and Joseph decided to exchange the gifts they received from the wise men? Maybe we would like to exchange some of the gifts that the wise men brought. Gold is fit for a king but we don't really want Jesus to be the king of our life. We would rather have a Jesus who is elected to govern us and if we don't like His laws, we can simply vote Him out of office. If Jesus is not the absolute ruler of our mind and body, then we deny He is our king and try to exchange the gift of gold. Frankincense is the symbol of Jesus being true God. We don't use incense enough. It takes too long and makes people cough. Do we want to exchange Frankincense for something a little more human. If Jesus is only a good moral teacher, then we may not have to listen to Him, but if we accept that Jesus is True God from True God, then we will be obligated to listen to Him. Do we recognize Jesus as simply a holy man? C. S. Lewis in his book, *Mere Christianity* wrote:

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg - or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us." [i]

Perhaps we would like to exchange the myrrh? I like the little baby Jesus in the crib. He is cute and cuddly, a real kind of warm fuzzy feeling. Don't start talking about sin and salvation and dieing on the cross.

#### Reference

[i] *The Real Presence through the Ages*, Michael Gaudoin-Parker, ed., Alba House, New York, 1993, p. 42.

[ii] *Mere Christianity*, C.S.Lewis, Simon & Schuster, 1980, p. 56.



Rev. Lawrence P. Adamczyk, The grandson of Polish immigrants, Lawrence (Larry) Adamczyk was born in Baltimore, MD. A life-long Catholic, Lawrence studied history in college and graduate school, eventually earning a Ph.D. in 19th century European Diplomatic History. After teaching for several years in various colleges around the country, Lawrence entered seminary and was ordained a diocesan priest in 2003. He is currently assigned as assistant pastor at St. Philip Neri/St. Clement Parish in Linthicum, MD.



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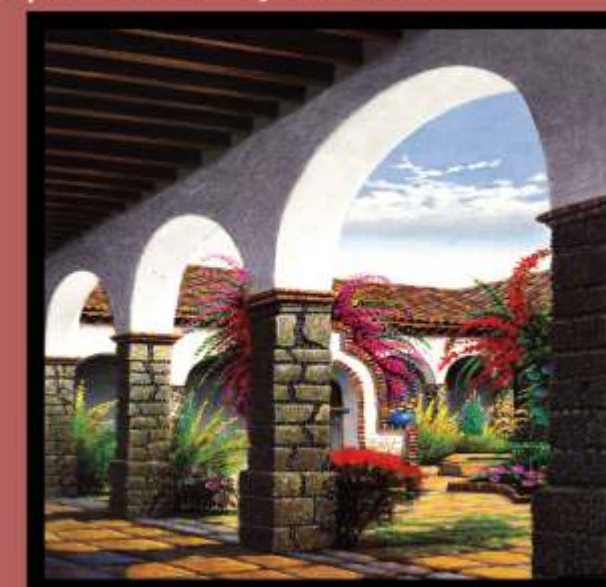
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# Incarnation:

## that all may have life in full

Fr. Austin Murphy

The Christmas season, as the Church celebrates it, is all about the Incarnation – the fact that in Jesus, “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14) The Incarnation is clearly seen in the Baby born in the stable and laid in a manger in Bethlehem, but this also has implications beyond that simple and beautiful manger scene. The fact that the King of Kings was born into our world led Jesus, Mary, and Joseph to be refugees in Egypt, the martyrdom of the Holy Innocents, the arrival of the Magi from the east to adore Him, and the ministry of John the Baptist at the Jordan. We celebrate all of these things throughout the Christmas season, and with St. John we recognize that, “what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes ... and touched with our hands ... was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and ... proclaim to you.” (1 John 1:1-3)

The appearance of Jesus is the obvious evidence of the Incarnation. However, the Incarnation is also about more than “what we have seen.” The fact that God became human means that Jesus took on everything that it is to be human – including all of our vulnerability and need. The Incarnation did not simply begin the day Christ was born. Rather, the Incarnation started at the moment when Mary accepted God's will for

her when the Angel Gabriel approached her and announced that she was “full of grace,” and “the Lord is with you.” Incarnation – Christ's and every human person's – takes place when the child is conceived. This is at the heart of what we believe about the dignity and sacredness of human life: from conception until natural death. God is the Author and Lord of that life – we are merely caretakers, stewards of that great gift.

During Advent, we are filled with anticipation for the arrival of the Christ child at Christmas. This anticipation can be likened to the joyful yearning of an expectant mother who awaits the arrival of her child's birth. However, that child is already present to her – being nurtured and loved in her womb. For us in the Church, we also await the arrival of Christ, while at the same time we are filled with joy because of the presence of Christ already with us.

This is the mystery of the Incarnation – a reality, not some abstract idea. We believe that the eternal Son of God truly took on our flesh – with all its messiness, all its vulnerability, all its neediness – and because of that, our own messiness, our own vulnerability, our own neediness is somehow made holy, somehow raised to a

new dignity. Our advocacy for the unborn stems from this reality. All life – regardless of its condition or potential – is sacred, because through that very life we are connected to Jesus in a very real and physical way.

Those who would deny the value of that life often do so with equivocation about “when life begins” or what makes someone “human.” However, science is more and more confirming what our faith has realized for a long time. Each person conceived – from that very moment of conception – is unique, loved, and unrepeatable. Jesus was Jesus from that first moment of His conception when Mary said “yes” to God. He did not begin to develop as one “glob of tissue” or “collection of cells,” and then somehow “become” human and “become” Jesus. This is the reality of life; it is the reality of the Incarnation, and we all share in this reality.

When we celebrate the season of the Incarnation, we cannot help but be drawn into the mystery of human life – even as we acknowledge that God chose to share this life with us. Our faith, and science as well, has attested to the fact that life begins at the moment of conception, and our advocacy on behalf of the unborn is rooted in this truth.

As a Church, we are moved by the mystery of the Incarnation to celebrate not only Christ's life but all life. We all, with Christ, share this marvelous truth; and we can show our gratitude and love for life through the lens of our faith. The Church offers a Rite for Blessing a Child in the Womb, recognizing the gift of life already present in a family when a mother becomes pregnant. We give our material support to pregnancy centers (like our own local Mary's Center), which offer to mothers the support and service that they fear they may not have in the midst of a difficult pregnancy.

Advocacy on behalf of the unborn is more than the political shouting match that is often portrayed. It is the gift of a free sonogram so a young mother can understand the great mystery of life that is already unfolding in her womb. It is the prayer of a community for those who are afraid and alone in the face of this awesome mystery. It is the comfort of receiving donated baby clothes, bottles, and formula so that a woman knows that her child is already loved and desired – by us as much as by God!

All of this is rooted in the Incarnational mystery of faith. Jesus chose to enter our

world as a child in Mary's womb. Advent is the special season when this reality – this mystery of our Lord's life – is accentuated and liturgically real. At our liturgy, we pray as a Church, “Come, Lord Jesus,” already anticipating the arrival of our newborn King. When we have a greater appreciation for the reality of the Incarnation – for the living presence of life, and the Lord of Life, in the womb – we can celebrate with even fuller joy at the Nativity of Christ.

During the “season of the Incarnation,” we are carried into Christ's first human experiences. Our Blessed Mother embraces us when we embrace that mystery. The Rosary has always been a powerful tool for the protection of human life, and all the more should we pray with Our Lady in this season of Life. As we enter into the beautiful traditions and celebrations of the Christmas season, let's look around ourselves and see all the

wondrous echoes of that same divine mystery of the Incarnation in our own lives.



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Fr. Austin was born and raised in Baltimore, growing up in Catonsville - the oldest of four. After high school at Mt. St. Joseph, he attended UMBC, and eventually responded to God's call to priesthood. He studied philosophy at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore before heading to Rome to study theology at the North American College. He was ordained a priest in 2003 and has worked as an associate pastor, college chaplain, vocations director, and pastor. Fr. Austin has been pastor at Christ the King in Glen Burnie since July of this year.

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# Mexican Restaurant



# Family

Adding warmth, focus,  
and a personal touch  
to family gatherings

Suzanna Molino Singleton



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**G**ift cards, gift cards and more gift cards – they are everywhere. Dozens displayed on supermarket kiosks and offered on almost every retail website. Gift cards seem to be the “easy way out” of purchasing and giving Christmas gifts. We search quickly online, choose a design, decide on an amount, click “place order,” and it arrives. Shopping done. Sometimes a gift card isn’t even in physical form – *e-gift cards* can be sent, too. We don’t even have to wrap those!

Our “excuse” for giving a gift card is so the recipient can select an item they desire instead of us picking a gift they may not like. Or does it merely let us off the hook of taking the time to creatively contemplate a unique gift idea to make or purchase?

Giving gift cards doesn’t seem to include much heartfelt thought or personalization. Yet here it is 2019, we are a totally techy society, and gift cards aren’t going anywhere.

When we gather with family during the Christmas season and tote along our gift card gifts – have we at least taken the time to place them in tiny decorative bags? Maybe attach a pretty ribbon? Write a sweet note? Include a candy cane? Have we added a little *something* to the gift – a special touch?

This same concept applies with interpersonal exchanges at our family gatherings. Sometimes there is no heartfelt personalization; they can seem impersonal. What warmth and special touches are we adding to our time together? Are we present, or merely tossing gift bags under the tree and plopping on the sofa to stare at the TV, or phone, and ignoring everyone in the living room?

Are we talking, sharing, sitting face to face, actively listening to – and laughing with – the people we love? Even helping the party host in the kitchen with last minute prep or serving? Or do our excuses include *I’m tired, I don’t feel like talking, that person gets on my nerves, it’s too much effort to deal with this family, or I’m feeling cranky.*

If we can’t contribute anything of ourselves, can’t conjure up and spread a little

Christmas spirit, why did we even bother to go?

As much as we can take the easy way out by purchasing gift cards, it seems we sometimes take the easy way out by ignoring our moms, dads, aunts, uncles, cousins, young kids, teens, and even our spouses. Notice the 85-year-old, who these days is naturally frailer and quieter. Is he or she sitting alone while her adult children, in-laws, cousins, and grandchildren swirl around her, taking the “easy way out” by avoiding uncomfortable interactions with a senior in a wheelchair?

Yes, at times communicating with people –

*How can families be  
“present” with each  
other this  
Christmas among  
the materialistic  
wrappings?*

even those we love – can be painful, challenging, or even annoying. We are flawed humans. There is Auntie nagging a nephew: “*When are you getting married, hmmm?*” There is the cousin bragging about the cost of his new sports car. The non-talkative brother is not adding to your one-sided conversation. The uncle is asking, “*So what’s new with you?*” (Everyone seems to dislike *that* question!) Your sister doesn’t like your trendy Christmas outfit and tells you. And dear sweet Grandpa keeps repeating his old stories.

As much as we will be ready to dig into the lasagna, turkey, and sweet potato feast spread across the dining room table, and as greedily as we will dig into that pile of gifts

under the Christmas tree, could we dig deep inside of our Christian hearts and do what we must during those few precious hours together?

Our time, attention, and warm conversations are the genuine gifts. We can make those pretty and sweet too, like a thoughtfully wrapped gift. If we are showing up, then we should show ourselves.

How can families be “present” with each other this Christmas among the materialistic wrappings? Will we add a special touch to our time together? Let’s challenge ourselves to personalize our interactions. Here is a simple formula using a **GIFT** acronym:

**G**ive your close attention  
“An attentive ear is the joy of the wise.” [Sirach 3: 29]

**I** be INTERESTED in conversation  
“Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.” [Colossians 4:6]

**F**OCUS carefully on each other  
“Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.” [Philippians 2:4]

**T**ake TIME for each person  
“... they were grouped together as one family.” [1 Chron 23:11]

How will our true Christmas gifts be wrapped come December 25? Hopefully in the warmth, peace, and love of Christ evident in the presence we share with others.



Suzanna Molino Singleton (suzannamolino@littletalymd.com) is a Maryland writer. As founder and director of the nonprofit Promotion Center for Little Italy, Baltimore, she feels quite passionate about her Italian heritage as granddaughter of 4 immigrants. Suzanna is the author of *Baltimore’s Little Italy*; *The Italian Immigrants’ Daughter*; and is writing *The Italian Community in Baltimore*.



T

# GOD DESIRES OUR *TRUST*

Meredith Rubeling

If you're anything like me, you like the idea of control. To be in control, to have a sense of "power" in life is attractive and alluring. I have to remind myself that the desire for control is something common to all mankind. It was, after all, the temptation that caused the first woman to sin. Imagine Eve in the garden surrounded by beauty, abundance, and the companionship of her husband, Adam. Even though she was given all of those wonderful gifts from God, she doubted the divine goodness when the serpent tempted her. The devil planted a seed of doubt in Eve's heart. This caused Eve to let her trust of God die in her soul. Satan tricked Eve into believing that God was somehow "holding out" on her. In an effort to be in control, to have what she felt was rightfully hers, Eve chose the apple. She chose to sin.

Do you ever struggle like Eve? Do you ever find yourself grasping at different things in life because you feel like they are meant to be yours? Do you ever question if God really has a plan for your life, especially when things are challenging and heartbreaking? In those difficult times, do you allow the trust of your creator to die in your heart? Or do you choose to trust, even when you feel like you are walking in the dark?

This past year was one of the most challenging years of my life. About a year ago, I started dating a man who I was wholeheartedly convinced I was going to marry. We had been friends since early college, and had a beautiful camaraderie. The relationship was not something I had anticipated, as he was a vehement non-denominational Christian, and I am an ardent Catholic. Once we got into a relationship, we immediately started having long discussions about faith. At first, I have to admit I was incredibly hopeful that he would convert to Catholicism. I found myself praying novenas asking for God to soften his heart towards the faith. I even felt prompted to invite him to RCIA(Rites for Christian Initiation for Adults) in the Catholic Church. I shared with him that I had always wanted to marry someone who is Catholic, and raise my kids in that way of life. I loved him so much, and wanted to marry him in the Church, united by the love of God and the Catholic faith.

My heart broke when our discussions on faith quickly turned into heated arguments. I desperately wanted him to convert, to see my view of the Church. I tried to explain the Church's teachings to the best of my ability. I frequently felt as though I was lacking the knowledge to adequately describe certain

details of the faith to my intellectual boyfriend. I realize now that I was grasping at control. I wanted his view of the Church to change so that we could be together and get married. I was so selfish and delusional to somehow think that I could change his heart.

I still imagine if this wish came through. So, one might ask what the difference would be. Would that make me less controlling? The answer is no. We just have to understand to what extent it is our will instead of God's will. How much do we push through? Scripture says, "Delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." (Psalm 37:4) Trusting in God means abandonment to his divine will, asking him to confirm our desires according to his plans. Sometimes, it works as we pray, at other times, it doesn't. What I have come to find is that God is the one who softens hearts, in His time. God speaks to each heart uniquely, and we are all moved by different things, especially when it comes to faith. Through that relationship, I learned that I am not a Catholic because of my knowledge of the faith and God. I am a Catholic because I have encountered Christ's deep love in the Eucharist and confession.



What I also learned is that God is a good and loving Father. At times life can feel unfair and difficult, and we wonder if God really cares about us, and if He is watching over us. Whenever I find myself doubting God's goodness, I like to think about this image: Envision a father strolling down a dirty path with his young son. As the toddler slowly walks along, his father keeps a close eye on each of his steps. But the father is also watching the path ahead of his son. He is attentive to stray rocks, roots and other obstacles that may hinder the child's way. In an act of concern for his child, he anticipates things that may harm his son. At times the child becomes defiant and strays from the safe path, and slips and falls. Crying, he picks himself up from the dirt and runs to his father, who comforts him with his loving arms. The father reminds his son that he loves him, and as the child begins to walk again, he continues to watch the child's path to help prevent his son from getting seriously harmed.

God's commandments and rules can feel like they are inflicting unnecessary pain

and suffering. Rules can also feel like such an inconvenience. But God in His infinite mercy and goodness has placed guidelines in our lives to protect us. When I broke up with my boyfriend I remember wrestling with God in prayer; I so badly wanted the relationship to work. However, as much as I tried, I couldn't shake something God had placed on my heart. Scripture talks about the importance of couples being "equally yoked." I knew that I desired and needed someone who treasured the Catholic faith as much as I did. As hard as it was to end the relationship, I look back on it now and I am filled with gratitude. God knew what we both needed. He knew that our future life together would have been filled with turmoil because of our different beliefs. God was protecting me when I didn't even realize it. Then, I realized the difference between controlling and trusting. Controlling means wishing that the intended desires come through at all cost. Trusting means being open to the outcome

no matter how it comes. In that case, it is God who makes it either happen or not. The latter is a product of faith.

That whole experience tested my trust in God tremendously. I had to choose Christ and (the Catholic Church) my faith over the relationship. I'm so happy I chose Jesus. The beautiful reality is that God knows my heart and my desires better than anyone, even myself. He has filled me with an incredible amount of peace and joy since that time. I see how He orchestrates my life. He leads me and keeps me safe. I know that He protected me from what I thought I wanted, because He has something better in store. And, He has brought me to a new level of trust and intimacy with Him because He loves me! I am overwhelmed by the gift of His love!



Meredith Rubeling is passionate about her Catholic faith and relationship with Jesus. It influences her life daily, especially her work as a cardiac registered nurse and clinical nursing instructor. She enjoys spending time with family and friends, traveling, writing, and spreading truth.



# Serenity:

## Recovering Heavenly Peace at Christmas

Ruth Popp

As I approach my 30th Christmas married to my husband, I look back on a broad range of Christmas experiences. Family photo albums would show five pajama-clad, smiling daughters holding their stockings with a candy cane peeking out of the top of each one. Does the photo ever tell the whole story? In our home, we have allowed holy days to become mere holidays encumbered with traditions connected to food, decorations, entertainment, mass mail-outs, pageants, ballets, and gift giving. Too much! There were often irritations, expenses, and exhaustion that stole my joy. Serenity was lost.

Last year I wondered my way into a massive Advent perspective shift. Having been asked to give a talk on the subject, I prayed, pondered, and reviewed the Church's teaching on Advent. It is all about celebrating Jesus' first coming, and

awaiting His return in glory. It occurred to me that I had always stressed celebrating the birth of our Savior and glossed over any focus on Jesus' Second Coming. Yet, what could have a more profound impact on humanity than the Second Coming of Jesus Christ? I began to wonder, "How would it change my celebration of Advent if Jesus really was to return on December 25<sup>th</sup>?" What would I do with my days until then? Curious, I pulled out a piece of paper and made a list. Here is my 2018 list:

1. Forgive – actually work at it
2. Do good to those who have done harm to me.
3. Invite my family to serve the poor together way before Christmas and perhaps before Thanksgiving, too.

4. Pray for my deceased parents and have Masses offered for them.

5. Focus more on loving my family with tremendous gratitude, knowing that it is my last month to be Tom's wife, the last month that I have a unique relationship with "my" children.

6. Go to confession begging the Lord to reveal to me anything that would hinder or prevent me from spending eternity with Him in heaven.

7. Receive the Eucharist more often with a new awareness that soon I will see Him face to face.

It was the best Christmas list I ever made. This focus on Christ's imminent return got a hold of me in surprising ways. It shifted my gaze off the faults of others and onto my own attitudes and actions.

What I found when looking into my own heart were abandoned attempts at forgiveness, a spirit that is critical of others, and a growing selfishness that manifests as irritability when my plans are thwarted. Second, I was surprised that my list looked somewhat penitential, but felt like an invitation to renewed intimacy with Christ. I looked at my list again and resolved to attempt it.

That night, I took a hot bath and floated in the water imagining Jesus' return. I could hear my own heartbeat very clearly. I just stopped and listened for a bit to my own heart thumping in perfect rhythm. I was filled with gratitude. I found myself thanking God for this body that had carried me through 50+ years of life. I was strangely unconcerned with the last 9 pounds I'd like to lose. Gratitude and wonder flooded over me that my life has happened at all, that I have been one of God's children. This gratitude and wonder stayed with me.

Expecting Jesus turned out to be extraordinarily helpful in sifting through all the activity I either crammed into Advent, or felt guilty about not doing. Some years, if you could have watched me from above you might have thought my Advent mantra was: "Jesus is coming. Look busy!" But, that doesn't work if He is really coming. If Jesus is just days away, keeping up with others suddenly feels ridiculous. I forgot about them and turned my gaze to Jesus. As I got in line to receive the Eucharist, to pick up kids in the carpool lane, or to buy groceries, a sense of His nearness filled me with expectant hope. Hope spilled into growing clarity about what matters to Jesus. I realized that being on the Nice List has no value in heaven, but the Loving and Forgiving Lists are essential.

Because Jesus will not be fooled by appearances, I stopped looking to create photo-worthy memories and concentrated on loving the people God has entrusted to me. The Lord joined my husband and me together for a time. When Jesus returns, time is up. Suddenly, my desire to fix my husband seemed out of place. Instead, I

wanted to hug him, look into his eyes and say, "Thank you from the bottom of my heart for loving me. We took some hits, and we weren't always good teammates, but we never gave up on each other! We are finishing together!" Instead of looking at my daughters and thinking, "What should you be doing right now?" I just wanted to enjoy them and whisper toward heaven, "thank you for every moment they are still 'mine.'" Overflowing gratitude.

Reorienting my life to His return helped me back to the childhood joy and serenity I remember. It really did! I did not accomplish everything on my list, but it was okay because by the time Christmas came I was looking less to myself and more to Jesus to find perfection. I decorated less, shopped less, cooked more, and shelved photo mail-out attempts. I slowed way down. I began to see every beautiful thing as a gift from God that just might be passing away: the smell of

coffee, the grain of wood, the setting sun, the late geese honking as they flew south. *The more aware I became of the constant shower of God's gifts, the more my gifts were given in a spirit of gratitude. Each gift became a way of saying, "Thank you for being in my life," "You are a blessing," and, "I love you."* I wanted to share the delight God was growing in me. We sang "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" each night by candlelight. Finally, I meant every word.

This year, I invite you to ponder the Second Coming with me. This emphasis may sound odd, but we know He is coming. *Love is coming back for you.* Soak in that truth. Give yourself time and space to wonder how you might prepare your heart and your household to receive Christ the King in joy.



Ruth Popp is a graduate of the United States Naval Academy. She and her husband Tom have five daughters ranging in age from 14 to 28 years old. She has written Bible study materials for women through Walking With Purpose, Inc. A veteran homeschooler of 21 years, she served as the Director and President of the Board of St. Thomas Aquinas Tutorial and the first Director of Development for the CLT, the new standard for college entrance exams. Ruth loves to encounter, write about, and speak about God's patient and personal love.



## Couples Corner

# Be Gifts To Each Other

Fr. Vincent Arisukwu



Kirk and Megan Hofmeister

I officiated at a wedding in the first week of October, and my heart was filled with joy and sorrow at the same time. I watched the beautiful couple in their nicely made wedding gown and designer suit. I admired that they decided to start their union as husband and wife within the most holy sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist. The couple seemed convinced about the marriage covenant they were going into. They looked poised to bear witness to God's love in the world. I was in amazement while presiding at their wedding with all the enthusiasm and passion present in the church. My emotional reaction was evident for the new couple as I watched them say, "I do." I looked at the family of both the bride and the groom. I pondered at the excitement in the entire church and marveled at the eminently joyful faces radiating hope. Over two hundred people in attendance, beautifully dressed for this singular occasion which took more than two years of planning. Everyone was waiting for the young couple to utter those final words, "...till death do us part," and they did. So, why

did I have mixed feelings?

It is because, recently, I have come to see so much conflict, pain, and disappointment in so many marriages. As a priest and a marriage and family therapist in training, accompanying couples in those challenging moments can be both emotionally draining and spiritually daunting. I was beginning to fear for this couple on the very day of their wedding (which I shouldn't). This fear is because of the influence of secularized faith in today's world. To counter my concern, I prayed harder: that this joy and excitement would remain for the new couple. I prayed that they would discover in themselves something special, not just the ritual of giving rings to each other, but the grace of being mutual gifts for the rest of their lives.

The dictionary meaning of gift is that it is a thing given willingly to someone without payment; a present. The key words here are "willingly" and "without payment." To give

a present to someone implies a recognition of the bond or relationship between the giver and the gift. In some cases, a gift is something offered to a family member, a friend, or someone cherished for certain attributes. The intention for giving a gift is to add to the person's joy. A gift explains what the receiver represents to the giver. It is a sign of appreciation, value, and love. We can look at couples as gifts in three ways - spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

In marriage, the giver is the gift. Sacramentally, the Church teaches that every sacrament consists of matter and form. Matter is the physical material used to administer the sacrament. For instance, in baptism, you have water poured on the head of the individual and the oil used to anoint the head and the chest. Then, there is the spoken word which pronounces the action performed with the matter. The priest/minister says, "I baptize you..." That is the form. Every sacrament has the external ingredient (matter) and the spoken words (form) which come together to

provide efficacy of the sacramental act. In the sacrament of marriage, the couple exchange rings (don't be tricked because that's not the matter) as they utter the words, "Take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity." The ring is only a sign of their love. Recognize that the priest cannot take the ring and give it to either the bride or the groom in marriage. Assuming that the ring is available whereas one of the couples fail to show up, no one else has the power to put the ring on the finger of the bride/groom present. It is only the couple that perform this act to each other. For that reason, we call them the ministers of their sacrament (of marriage). Here is the deal; the body of the

bride and the body of the groom form the matter for the sacrament. They are gifts to each other expressed in the conjugal act. The couple become bonded together. They produce further gifts, the children who become blessings of their union. The married life is fecund because of the gifts of procreative love. Saint Paul once wrote, "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship." (Rom. 12:1)

This would make more sense if we relate the concept of gifts to the famous marriage passage of Paul in Ephesians Chapter 5. Paul says to women, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord." (Eph. 5:22) To submit means to give in to or to yield to an authority. To submit here does not imply coercion. It does not connote the idea of a servant who submits to a higher or superior power. The husband as an authority figure represents Christ. Submission implies giving oneself willingly for the other. Saint Paul goes further to explain the corresponding demand for this submission on the part of the men this way, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." (Eph. 5:25) Christ loved the Church and became a gift to her. He offered himself as a living sacrifice for the Church. Paul continues, "In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies." (5:28) Loving one's wife as one's own body means loving the gift in the giver now bonded by union of the sacrament. That is

the spiritual bond, the meaning of the contract engagement where the couples say, "In sickness and in health, in richness and in poverty. I will love you and honor you for the rest of my life."

Emotionally, couples make a huge investment in their marriage. Imagine presenting a gift to someone without any appreciation from the person, a gift you took time to search out for. You spent time and energy getting this gift ready. You are filled with excitement and enthusiasm with the hope to elicit joy and happiness in the recipient. Then, she/he crashes your excitement. That could be painful. Couples prepare to be gifts to each other for years. They search for a long time. They prepare themselves in all possible ways. They expect their partner to receive them with the greatest joy ever.

When we speak about emotions in marriage, caution must be taken not to imagine that marriage is all about emotions. Rather, emotions play an integral part in the manner in which couples accept themselves and become present. Pope Francis once gave a classic description of emotional control thus, "'emotional control' doesn't mean stuffing your feelings, denying your feelings, or refusing to recognize your feelings. It means being aware of your feelings and being able to choose to make the healthiest response in the presence of those feelings." The husband and wife bring emotional gifts into their marriage by making their feelings present to each other - joy, affection, compassion, hope, trust. They hope to feel safe, secure, appreciated. They hope to provide strength and support for each other. They hope to actualize their self-



Doug and Sarah Shackelfield



worth, form an alliance, and are able to take risks of love together. They desire each other as a guarantee to satisfy their basic attachment longing. Most times, the internal groaning is, "I need you to be there for me. I love to feel your presence." Recognizing these needs enables couples to express their emotions freely even when they are negative- anger, sadness, pain, disappointment, fear, and disgust. Couples who cannot express these feelings experience frustration. It is as if their gifts are missing and they feel rejected.

Physical presence confirms the spiritual and emotional gift. Being physically present is a guarantee of the commitment of living and moving together in the marriage journey. Every spouse wants to see her/his partner. The woman wants to do things with her husband. She wants others to see them together shopping, going to church, driving, vacationing. This enhances bonding and creates mutual balance. To be physically present is to reinforce the commitment made on the wedding day. Have you ever imagined why a spouse panics when their partner leaves the home

from time to time for a long period? You hear such complaints, "She/he is not available." That means, "I'm not seeing him/her." Such physical absence can erode the spiritual and emotional balance which marriage requires. Remember the case of Adam and Eve! Adam's absence exposed Eve's vulnerability. That's the danger, an absent partner exposes the weakness of the marriage relationship.

It is important to reconcile the spiritual, emotional, and physical gifts in marriage. The mind, the body, and the feelings are necessary ingredients for building a home. If a partner is mentally present but emotionally absent, it becomes like an empty gong merely producing sound. If a partner is emotionally invested in the relationship without being physically present, the marriage cord becomes unreasonably stretched in one direction. If one partner is physically present but mentally missing, the marriage flavor runs

dry and leads to frustration. Think about a young mom who takes her nine-month-old baby to church. As soon as she tries to settle down, the baby begins to cry from hunger. This mom is divided between taking care of her baby and listening to the priest. Either she leaves and takes care of her needs or she stays and does not hear what the priest says. The child just needs her attention. In a similar way, that child is the image of your spouse or partner. When she/he cries for attention, she/he is seeking the presence of her gift. She/he wants to be sure that she/he is appreciated and that there is a mutual interest which you share, "... till death do us part."

When your spouse cries for attention, there is a seeking of your presence, the gift. Your partner is searching for appreciation and the mutual interest which you share...

Popcak, R., & Popcak, G. (2013, March 19). Pope Francis, "Keep watch over your emotions!". Retrieved from <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithonthecouch/2013/03/pope-francis-keep-watch-over-your-emotions/>.



Fr. Vincent is a priest from Nigeria, currently serving as associate pastor at Christ the King Church in Maryland. Founder of the Family Apostolate Inc and Magazine, he holds a master's degree in Communication and is presently a doctoral student of Marriage and Family Therapy at Eastern University in Pennsylvania.

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# Christmas Around The World

## Poland

Scott Romanowski

**P**olish Christmas traditions center on a very special Christmas Eve dinner - the *Wigilia* (pronounced ve-geel-lee-yah), which begins with the sighting of the first star in the evening. Traditionally, the meal consists of 12 vegetarian dishes in honor of the 12 Apostles.

One non-food item found on the table is hay - in honor of the manger. An extra place is always set, just in case anyone - stranger or otherwise - stops by. After saying grace, the meal begins with the breaking and passing of the *oplatek* - a wafer made like the communion host, but rectangular in shape with a depiction of The Nativity stamped on it. Each person breaks off a piece and passes it to the next. It's also customary to send the *oplatek* (with a piece broken off of it) to family and friends who will be spending Christmas elsewhere, and some even have the custom of sharing the wafer with family pets.

A wide variety of sweets and pastries make up the dessert for this evening. A Polish folk belief says that the mood of the *Wigilia* will set the tone for the coming year, so a special effort is made to avoid conflict on Christmas Eve. A big breakfast, with meats, is served Christmas morning.

A Polish Christmas wouldn't be complete without the singing of *Koledy* (Christmas carols). Polish carols date back to at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and often take on the form of lullabies.

Poles typically begin their celebration on Christmas Eve, and extend it for 40 days to February 2 - the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord.

### MAKOWIEC POLISH POPPY SEED ROLL

Scale 1x2x3x

#### INGREDIENTS

Dough:

- 1 cup (250 ml) milk
- 4 teaspoons (15 g) sugar
- 2 packets (14 g) yeast
- 4 cups (500 g) all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 egg yolks
- 1/4 cup (50 g) butter
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

Filling:

- 10 ounces (300 g) poppy seeds
- 1/2 cup (100 g) sugar
- 2 teaspoons butter
- 2 egg whites
- 3 tablespoons honey
- 1 cup raisins
- 1 egg
- 1 tablespoon oil
- for glaze (optional);
- 2 cups powdered sugar
- 1/4 cup milk

#### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Cover the poppy seeds in boiling water and let sit for a few hours or overnight
2. Heat the milk to 110 F (43 C), pour into a large bowl
3. Stir in the sugar and the yeast, let sit for 5 minutes
4. Stir in the flour, salt, egg yolk, butter, and vanilla, kneading my hand to work in all of the flour
5. Cover the bowl with a dish towel and let rise until doubled in size about 90 minutes
6. While the dough rises, strain the water from the poppy seeds using a paper towel lined colander



Fr. George Asigre

**I** grew up in Zuarungu in the Upper East Region of Ghana, which is in West Africa. Long before I came to understand the meaning of Christmas, I knew there was an annual feast called "Bronya," a term which originates from the Akan language of Ghana and means a joyous and loving celebration of a gift from God. In this specific case, the gift is his Son. Christmas in Ghana is celebrated by Christians and non-Christians alike.

It is both a spiritual and social occasion. Spiritually, Christmas is marked by a heightened sense of the need to be prepared for the Savior by way of the soul's renewal and revival. Christians hold prayer vigils, culminating in life-transforming decisions, making peace with one another and with God.

Ghanaians give true meaning to the word "Christmastide" since it takes almost a whole month to celebrate! Mainly, it is a series of social events marked by extensive visiting of family and friends, entertainment, and even courtship that may eventually lead to marriage. During this Christmas season, fashion is at its best as groups, friends, families, and villages display their newest clothing designed purposely for the Christmas celebration. The celebration begins on the eve of December 24th, mainly in churches, as well as December 25th in the daytime. Subsequently, on village market days, each village organizes its celebration on a different market day. The chief's palace often serves as the first point of call of the village community to celebrate with their chief; after that, the celebration moves out to the village market where there will be music, dance, food and drinks, and a display of rich traditional culture.

As I remember it, the Christmas season in Ghana is charged with an atmosphere of "conviviality", a word which derives from the Latin word "convivium" meaning banquet. Thus, parties are organized by different categories of people: colleagues, friends, family members, village communities, etc. As a young boy, I recall chasing guinea fowls to catch them. We would send them out to neighbors, friends, and in-laws as



Image by Crea8t from Pixabay

Christmas gifts. These gifts are full of meaning in the lives of people, especially in non-literate environments. Christmas cards mean little or nothing to people who cannot read or write.

I always longed for Christmas because it was when my father would buy me a new "smock," local attire akin to a tuxedo in the western world. Wives, sons, and daughters got their new outfits and dresses at this time of the year.

Christmas was also a special celebration for children who had the rare opportunity to eat rice and meat to their fill. Nicely dressed in their Christmas attire, the children move from house to house in the village singing and wishing people Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Their hosts usually responded by giving them rice, and if available, meat, sodas, biscuits, or toffees.

As already stated, that "Bronya" translates to the English word "Christmas." As elsewhere in the world, it is a festive and joyful celebration of God's gift of his Son to humanity for our salvation. God has given us His Son! Ghanaians reciprocate by offering our services to God at Christmas, reaching out to one another through gift-giving, prayer, reconciliation, sharing meals, music and dancing.





# Christmas Around The World

**C**hristmas is the feast of giving. God gave His only Son to save humankind and the people of God give back. That is Christmas. Christmas is a gift that we cannot possess until we give it to someone else. Christmas is celebrated in India differently. For some, this is a season of great joy, peace, and coming together as a family to celebrate. On the other hand, for other Christians living in dangerous areas it is a time of terror and fear because of the persecutions against Christians.

Christianity is India's third-largest religion after Hinduism and Islam, with approximately 28 million followers, constituting 2.3 percent of India's population. St. Thomas was one of the 12 Apostles who travelled far and wide, reaching India. He landed in Kodungallur in AD 52. I am proud to say that I come from the St. Thomas Tradition. The Syro-Malabar Church has contributed many priests, sisters, brothers, and lay missionaries all over the world. Christmas celebrations are a delightful mix of Syrian Christian, Western Christian, and local traditions in India.

I remember when I was a child, I looked forward to Christmas with a lot of excitement. From December 1<sup>st</sup> until December 25<sup>th</sup> we would abstain from meat and fish. All the children in the parish were instructed to select a Christmas friend to pray for and for whom to buy a Christmas gift. I was instructed by religious sisters and given a chart for each day to do a particular thing, like saying a special prayer, visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, reading scripture, attending Mass, or preparing the crib and special gifts for the Child Jesus.



## India

Fr. Binoy Akkalayil, O.S.S.T

I remember in my parents' house, my duty was to help prepare the Christmas crib and a Christmas tree. Families recreate the nativity scene by making their own crib. They start making it nearly a month before Christmas. Generally, we made cribs with hay and grass from the field and added many varieties of nativity figures. The parish churches make their own nativity scene as well. Almost every church holds a competition for the best nativity scene.

My brothers made beautiful stars with bamboo sticks and fancy cloth. They hung it above the house so that people could see it from far distances. The star represented the light of Christ. Each star spiritually reminds us, and points out to people, that Christ lives in this house. Even Hindus and Muslims decorate their houses with lights and stars in solidarity with the Christians. Buying and sending Christmas cards is very special in India. Vendors go from one house to another to sell the cards. Everybody makes sure to send cards to their friends and relatives.

Carol singing starts weeks before Christmas. Carols are sung in all local churches, and carol groups from the local

churches come to the homes of the parishioners. Each unit in the parish will organize carol singing and they are graded and given prizes for their performances.

Another specialty on Christmas is that many families gift their loved ones, and others, with plum cake. I saw my parents wrapping these plum cakes for my relatives and especially for neighbors from other faith traditions, thus creating and strengthening national unity in diversity.

Midnight Mass is the highpoint of the Christmas celebration. Everyone tries their best to attend Midnight Mass together with their family and friends. Children generally will travel to their parents' home to join them for this Mass. After the Vigil Mass the priest will cut the cake and distribute it to everyone as a symbol of sharing the joy of Christmas.

As St. Athanasius of Alexandria said "God became one of us so that we become like God" and that is the purpose of Christmas: transforming to be like Christ.



## Philippines

Amparo Camba

**T**he Philippines is predominantly a Catholic country that celebrates Christmas with immeasurable joy and hope!

Our Christmas traditions are of Spanish influence as a result of the country being under Spanish rule for 300 years. The festivities start with "Mesa de Gallo" - a 10-day early dawn Mass - that culminates with the Simbang Gabi, a Midnight Mass on December 24th. Mesa de Gallo is mostly attended by the elderly, since they are more likely to maintain the Mass schedule than the younger generation. After the Mass, the older folks often gather together to socialize over a cup of coffee and pastries.

During these 10 days, many merry activities occur and Christmas decorations are put up. One particular decoration I am fond of is the *star lantern*, which is illuminated by a single light bulb hanging on the front window of houses. The star signifies the Star of David. Another tradition close to my heart is Christmas caroling. Groups of friends and family members go from house to

house singing Christmas songs with the expectation of a contribution from the homeowners for the effort!

Simbang Gabi, or Midnight Mass, is the pinnacle of our Christmas celebrations. Filipino Catholics in the U.S. observe this tradition, too. Most churches put up a life size manger in front of the church as a reminder of the true meaning of the Holy Day, the Birth of Jesus! Singbang Gabi is followed by "Nuche Buena", a festive family meal that sometimes includes a roasted pig (lechon) as the centerpiece. Sometimes there will be delightful performances by those who have a talent to share. Finally, and of course the most anticipated, is the exchanging of Christmas gifts!

These traditions allow us to share the joys of Christmas with those who are dear to our heart! I hope these Filipino traditions stay alive, and never fade away from generations. After all, Christmas is a universal time for joy, peace and love for all of us!





# Las Posadas in the Latino Culture

Deacon Jose Gabin

**C**hristmas time is a time of joy where we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is a time to reflect and prepare to receive a God-child. There are many celebrations and traditions in the Hispanic community celebrated during Christmas. One of the most celebrated is Las Posadas.

Las Posadas is celebrated for nine days before Christmas, from December 16 to 24. They usually represent the pilgrimage that Mary and Joseph made when she was about to give birth to Jesus looking for a place to stay and spend the night. When celebrated during the nine days before Christmas, las Posadas is presented as a novena. These nine days of Posadas represent the nine months of Mary's pregnancy.

The Posadas are originally from Mexico. These were introduced by the Spanish conquerors to replace the traditions of the Aztecs (Mexican Indians) who celebrated, in December, the arrival of the main god and the war.

The celebration of the Posada begins with people meeting at a designated family house. Upon arriving at the house, they are divided into two groups; one group gets inside the house and the other stays outside asking for Posada (lodging) imitating Joseph and Mary when they arrived in Bethlehem. Outsiders sing the litany asking for Posada. When the song ends, the door opens and the outside group enters the house. Once inside, the celebration continues with songs, and a Rosary and a novena are usually made. Food and drinks are shared, and the participants continue singing and sharing stories and spending time together. The celebration continues during the following days at different houses until the nine days are completed.

This celebration caught my attention when arriving in the United States. Posadas are not celebrated in my original country of Puerto Rico. There, we celebrate a similar tradition called "parrandas" or "trullas." During the parranda, a small group of friends gather together and go to the house of another friend, usually after 10pm to surprise and wake the sleeping friend by playing instruments and singing at their door steps. "Parranderos" are then invited in where they continue singing and sharing food and drinks. A parranda

tends to be more secular than religious; however, many of the traditional aguinaldos (Puerto Rican Christmas songs) retain the holiday spirit.

After learning about, and experiencing, the Posadas, they became more significant for me than parrandas as they are religious and are closely connected with the birth of Christ. Also, as they are during the evening, not late at night, children participate in the celebration bringing a special meaning to it. It is friendlier and a more family-oriented celebration. Posadas are a good way to prepare our hearts with joy and prayer for the coming of Jesus Christ. Through them we make this preparation as a Christian family united by one God and savior. Hopefully our Lord Jesus will make "Posada" in our hearts and never leave.

## Navidad y sus tradiciones: Posadas Navideñas

**E**l tiempo de Navidad es un tiempo de alegría donde celebramos el nacimiento de nuestro Señor y Salvador Jesucristo. Es un tiempo para reflexionar y prepararse para recibir al niño Dios. Hay muchas celebraciones y tradiciones en la comunidad hispana celebradas durante la Navidad. Una de las más celebradas son Las Posadas.

Las Posadas se celebran nueve días antes de Navidad, del 16 al 24 de diciembre. Por lo general, representan la peregrinación que hicieron María y José cuando estaba a punto de dar a luz a Jesús en busca de un lugar para quedarse y pasar la noche. Como se celebra durante los nueve días antes de Navidad, las Posadas se presentan como un novenario. Estos nueve días de Posadas representan los nueve meses del embarazo de María.

Las Posadas son originales de México. Estas fueron introducidas por los conquistadores españoles para reemplazar las tradiciones de los aztecas (indios mexicanos) que celebraran, en diciembre, la llegada del dios principal y la guerra.

La celebración de la Posada comienza con personas que se reúnen en la casa de una familia designada. Al llegar a la casa, se dividen en dos grupos, un grupo entra a la casa y el otro se queda afuera pidiendo Posada, imitando a José y María cuando llegaron a Belén. Los que están afuera cantan la letanía pidiendo Posada. Cuando la canción termina, la puerta se abre y el grupo de afuera entra a la casa. Luego adentro, la celebración continúa con canciones, generalmente se hace un rosario y una novena. Se comparten alimentos y bebidas, y los participantes continúan cantando y compartiendo historias y pasando tiempo juntos. La celebración continúa durante los días siguientes en diferentes casas hasta que se completan los nueve días.

Esta celebración me llamó la atención cuando llegué a los Estados Unidos. Las posadas no se celebran en mi país original de Puerto Rico. Allí, celebramos una tradición similar llamada "parrandas o trullas". Durante la parranda, un pequeño grupo de amigos se reúne y va a la casa de otro amigo, generalmente después de las 10 p.m. y sorprende y despierta al amigo tocando instrumentos y cantando en la entrada de la casa. Luego los "Parranderos" son invitados a entrar a la casa y se continúa cantando y compartiendo alimentos y bebidas. Una parranda tiende a ser más secular que religiosa, sin embargo, muchos de los aguinaldos tradicionales (canciones navideñas puertorriqueñas) conservan el espíritu navideño.

Después de conocer y vivir las Posadas, estas se volvieron más importantes para mí que las parrandas, ya que son religiosas y están estrechamente relacionadas con el nacimiento de Cristo. Además, como las celebraciones son temprano, no tarde en la noche, los niños participan en la

celebración dándole un significado especial. Es una celebración más amigable y más orientada a la familia. Las posadas son una buena manera de preparar nuestros corazones con alegría y oración para la venida de Jesucristo. A través de ellas hacemos esta preparación como una familia cristiana unida por un Dios y salvador. Esperamos que nuestro Señor Jesús haga "Posada" en nuestros corazones y nunca se vaya.







# Christmas Around The World



**T**he United States is a unique melting pot. It houses people and cultures from all around the world. Secular fun such as Santa Claus, Christmas lights, and caroling are a huge part of the Christmas spirit in the U.S. Like every other country, Christmas cheer centers on church, family, friends, food, and gift exchanging. However, one important aspect of Christmas in America is its deep-seated spirit of charity.

The United States was founded on Judeo-Christian principles. Even a quick, cursory glance at the founding documents gives all credit for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to the Triune God – no other. This spirit of God and our dependence on His providence still resonates deeply in the American psyche. As a result, many people feel compelled to remember the less fortunate, especially at Christmas. Secular charities abound. The U.S. Marine Corps Toys for Tots collects gifts for poor children. Make a Wish America provides dreams come true for children with terminal illnesses. The Holiday Project helps people in nursing homes, hospitals, and other residential institutions. Angel Tree provides gifts and

fellowship to prisoners and helps the families and children of prisoners. Some people choose to sponsor a local needy family providing an entire Christmas for them, including gifts for the whole family and groceries for a holiday feast.

Something that has become very popular in churches is the Jesse tree which is set up during Advent. Christmas trees are an important part of the season in America and the Jesse tree blends the two traditions. The idea comes from Isaiah 11:1 where the prophet says, “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” Jesse is the father of King David and Jesus was born of the royal line of David. The concept of the Jesse tree connects the faithfulness of God from the beginning of Genesis to the birth of Jesus. The Jesse tree places a different ornament on the tree for each day of Advent. For example, on the first day of Advent, an apple ornament is placed on the tree representing Adam and Eve and the first sin of humanity. Genesis 3 is the suggested scripture reading for prayer and meditation. Day 2 of Advent is Noah and the flood. Suggested ornaments are an ark or rainbow and the reading is Genesis 6-9. Day 3 is

Abraham and the Covenant. It continues each day through the last day of Advent with the birth of Jesus and a full tree of ornaments reflecting our salvation history. The Jesse tree is a wonderful way to read the Scriptures and become more prayerful with your family during Advent.

Churches in America have taken the idea of the Jesse tree a step farther and made it an opportunity to thank God for his faithfulness through the spirit of almsgiving. We remember that the nativity of Jesus is the image of poverty of spirit. Everything that we have is a gift from God, and we must love and help our neighbor as ourselves. Jesse trees in parishes are placed near the sanctuary. A need is chosen for collection such as helping the imprisoned, the homeless, or the elderly. International charities could also be chosen such as feeding hungry children in another country, supplying the needs of persecuted Christians or providing aid to areas suffering from natural disasters. Tags are placed on the tree with the necessary items requested. If it's for a homeless shelter, tags such as warm socks, toiletries, winter coats, warm gloves, etc. would be placed on the tree. Parishioners pick as many tags as they want and purchase the necessary items, placing them under the Jesse tree at church. Volunteers either wrap or ship the



items to their destinations. It's a beautiful expression of God's love in action.

The people of the United States love to help and give to others, especially at Christmas. They are truly charitable people. It has been part of our tradition since our independence from England in 1776. I hope this generous spirit always remains.

“Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take nothing with you that you have received – only what you have given.” St. Francis of Assisi



I

## Interview with Fr. Arek Ochalek

*“The military are people like the rest of us. They need Jesus, too.”*



Fr. Arek Ochalek

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**Fr. Arek Ochalek** is a priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, currently serving as the United States Chaplain recruiter for the Army. A native of Poland, he has two brothers and one sister. He has been a priest for twenty years, 11 of those years in the U.S. Army. Arek was ordained a priest for the Discalced Carmelites before entering the military. Currently a Major, he is the only priest serving as a chaplain recruiter in the United States. He also serves as senior chaplain at Fort Meade in Maryland, while traveling all over the country where he recruits Catholic priests into the military chaplaincy. Fr. Arek humorously describes himself as a “gypsy for Jesus.”

### Can you tell us a little bit about your position as a military chaplain?

Let me go first to the beginning of my adventure with the U.S. Army. It goes back to 2003 when I was a young, happy Carmelite friar working for the Vatican at Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center in the Holy Land. I was asked at that time to work with some of the American troops coming to our place from Mt. Sinai. After a while, their chaplain asked me, “They like you. Would you like to become an Army chaplain?” At the time, the idea seemed kind of crazy, but I said, “You know, I will try.” I was moved by

the hunger for Jesus among the troops. In 2004, I came to Baltimore and exchanged my habit for an Army uniform, and my sandals for Army boots.

As a priest, I traveled to many parts of the world: London, Italy, Spain, etc. So I didn't have any issues when it came to switching from Polish to American culture, except for the language. The biggest change for me was switching from a Carmelite to a diocesan priest lifestyle. That took some time and energy. But now, after 11 years in the Army, 14 of which include my time in Baltimore, I feel at home. I'm very grateful

for the formation and the contemplative nature of the discalced Carmelites which has helped me as a chaplain. I left Carmel because there was a bigger need for me in the Army. The hunger for Jesus displayed by the soldiers moved my soul, and I knew that was where I needed to be – bringing Jesus to God's people in the military.

### What does a typical day look like as a chaplain?

Working as a Catholic priest in the garrison setting, we begin in the morning with our units. We participate in PT (physical

training) with them. Then we have breakfast, take a shower, and go to the office. We meet with the soldiers and check on how they are doing. There may be briefings or meetings, then at noon I go to the garrison chapel for Mass, hear confessions, then go back to work. When I work in my unit, my job is less overtly religious but still consistently relationship-oriented and pastoral. And I always wear my cross, introducing myself as a chaplain. Right now, there are 86 priests serving as active duty chaplains among roughly 1,300 chaplains of other faiths. As you can see, a Catholic priest is in high demand in the Army where the needs are so great.

### What is the relationship with other non-Catholic chaplains like?

As chaplains, we never work alone. There is always a group of us. We are team players. Working in battalion or brigade settings, there are other battalions and there is often a rabbi or Protestant chaplain. If a soldier comes to me with a need from his Protestant perspective, I can always ask another chaplain to help. If I cannot perform, I can provide. It's the same for a Protestant chaplain when he has a Catholic soldier who needs help. He can reach out to me. We're team players and learn to work with each other, even if we don't always agree theologically. We respect different traditions, and if you make it all about Jesus, there is consensus in the end. We take care of everybody regardless of religious background. Our job is to make sure that the troops are okay. Again, if I cannot perform, I provide.

### As a military officer, do you carry a gun?

As chaplains, we have non-combatant status, and we do not carry guns. We are very strict about it. However, because of the wisdom of the Army, we have a Religious Affairs Specialist and they are part of Unit Ministry Team. They protect us.

### What is it like to be deployed?

From the chaplain's perspective, when we deploy, we immediately become gypsies for Jesus. For the priest, it's the best time ever because we are with our people 24-7. We share meals with them. We share tents with them. It's like living in a parish 24-7.

When you are a chaplain, you are with the people. So, if they stink, you stink. If they are hungry, you are hungry, “you just smell like your sheep.” Pope Francis remarked a few years ago that, if you are a shepherd at heart, “you must smell like you are of the sheep.”

We fly from place to place. You might spend one week on one base but always travel from place to place to cover the entire country. Wherever you go, you meet with the people, you prepare for Mass, hear their confessions, maybe have a meal with them, then fly out to another location. When I was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, especially around the holidays, there were very few priests around. We were constantly traveling. We fly on military helicopters called black hawks and chinooks. We have the very best pilots and aviators who work tirelessly to maintain these flying chariots so that we can safely traverse the battlefield.

### Do you ever experience trauma as a chaplain?

That's part of the job description. We deploy quite often. As I mentioned, there are only 86 priests on active duty. If there is need for our assistance, we offer it. So yes, we witness some tragic stuff here and there. But we are well protected, too. We have a God that covers us with his care and nourishes us as we go about nourishing

others. We don't want anyone to be in danger, but the reality is that a soldier's job is dangerous. As much as possible, we try to take the light of Jesus amidst the darkest of places.

### What is it like when the soldiers deploy, leaving their families?

We prepare for it. They know that deployment is coming. We have Family Readiness Groups (FRG) and many other resources. Right now, the deployments are shorter than they used to be. They used to be 13-15 months. They might be a little more often now, but last only 6-9 months, which makes it easier. Once the soldiers return, there is a period where they can decompress. They have plenty of resources. We tell them, “When you return, don't change everything immediately. Your spouse was in charge so let them be in charge. Give time to your kids individually. And once the soldier is deployed, there is also a chaplain who stays behind to help the family if needed. Again, team players.

Before I joined the Army, I used to believe that all soldiers are Rambo's and untouchable. After some years, I learned that they are human beings like the rest of us. They have struggles. They have extra stress, and their families go through extra stress having to move from place to place. They are tough, and they are trained to be tough, but they are humans like the rest of us.





**Do you think that the military takes good care of families?**

Absolutely. It is a well-structured organization... and not just the Army... but all branches of the military. We organize retreats for them. We call them Strong Bones. They aren't always faith-based, but it's about respecting each other, about communicating, building connections and relationships.

**How do you deal with a deployed Solider who has a spouse who says, "I want a divorce" or some other serious situation, and they can't get home?**

The military has many resources and some chaplains go to a special school to become Family Life Chaplains. So, if a situation is too complicated for me to solve, I refer them to the Family Life Chaplain. It's basically counseling and therapy. Every Army post has the counselors to help the soldiers and their families.

**How are special days like Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrated during deployment?**

We work with the commanders asking them to slow down for a short period of time. They still must do their job but at a slower pace. They have time to call their families. Sometimes the commander will serve a meal to show servant leadership. Everything slows down for a short time then goes back to high up tempo. Sometimes families will send a Christmas tree so the whole unit will get together and sit around the fireplace and maybe smoke a cigar and talk about each other's families. No one should feel alone at that time.

**What is the situation like when a soldier dies?**

The whole unit feels it especially during the deployment because you become a family. You see the same people almost 24-7. When there is a loss, it's like losing a sister or brother. So we get together, have a Memorial Service, and we send the body home on a special flight. We salute them, say our goodbyes and grieve as a community, as a unit. It takes time to heal. Some of them take it harder than others. It's not an easy time for anybody. The Army will

always give you tools to work with. And when we go to chaplaincy school, we are trained to be a grief counselor, to help people to go through the bereavement process.

**You mentioned resources, do you promote particular techniques for healing and grieving?**

First of all, the soldiers know I am there for them. I am their brother. I'm not a spiritual guru, but I know their pain and am able to empathize with their feelings. You get training, and they don't grieve differently than anyone else. That's why I like to simplify. And if they are Catholic or Christians, you can say, "Hey, it's all about Jesus. He's there with you crying, weeping. Don't forget Him." Without Jesus, it's difficult to manage.

**How do you think non-Christians cope with the difficult challenges in the military?**

When we work with them and they don't have a religious background, we just work with the humanity. Just a very basic human level. There is something common in all of us and you can connect through that. It would make me happy if they were Christian, if they had that extra step, but I cannot make a decision like that for them. That is their personal choice. I am not allowed to proselytize. As a chaplain, I have the mandate to serve soldiers no matter what they believe, in order that they may freely exercise their Constitutional – and if I may add, God-given – right, to believe as they wish. As Jesus taught us, we are to love others.

**Does wearing camouflage raise any stereotype against the military?**

Wherever I go there is a lot of respect for the uniform and service. Americans are very patriotic. It's very moving, very touching.

**Are there specific values that the Army seems to promote?**

The Army has a few things that are very simple but important. One of these is the Army values. It's explained in the acronym LDRSHIP which means *loyalty, duty, respect, selfless-service, honor, integrity*



and personal courage. And when you think about it, they are very Christian values.

**Is there continuity between active service and retirement/veterans?**

Very often, retirees like to stay at the base because they have access to all the facilities like the VA hospital, the commissary, and shops. And the chapels very often become the center of life. So, you have Mass, you have your priest who is leading the community. As we serve side by side, they become quickly connected with us. Our retirees become lectors, extraordinary ministers in the liturgy. When they transfer from place to place, there's still a connection. And chaplains know how to connect people to people.

**What kinds of items are always needed by the troops that civilians can help them with?**

From the physical perspective, they have what they need, but please just don't

forget them. They are sons and daughters, mothers and fathers. There are many organizations that donate items to them from sending candy to socks to any number of items. They like basic stuff – toiletries, powder, a little tree. Something like that. Just give them respect. Twenty percent of the Army population is Catholic and most of the senior staff is Catholic. It's a very Catholic-Christian culture in general. They are good people, willing to sacrifice their lives, and in doing so creates a lot of camaraderie.

**If you would want the people to remember one thing about the troops, what would it be?**

They are people like the rest of us. They have their problems;

they have their crosses to bear. Just remind them that they are loved. They are part of the community. And when those Catholic soldiers put away the uniform and retire, they come back to the parishes. Work with them. You will never have a better-trained person than a prior-serving soldier. And you will never have a better pastor than a retired chaplain. They have served with thousands of troops. Just love and respect them.



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## “NO ONE HAS GREATER LOVE THAN THIS, TO LAY DOWN ONE'S LIFE FOR ONE'S FRIENDS.”

John 15:13

Alvin Jordan

**M**ilitary deployments and separations are filled with emotions such as regret, guilt, and resentment that have a significant impact on military families. "Deployment" means moving military personnel from a home installation or base to a specified destination, usually a foreign combat zone. For military personnel and families, this means commitment, sacrifice, regret, guilt, and sometimes even resentment. When deployments happen, I firmly rely on my Catholic faith to put these uncertainties of deployments in GOD's hands.

When a person joins the U.S. military, they become part of a team with a rich heritage and legacy. As the adage says, "you become a part of something bigger than yourself." Likewise, when a man marries, he ceases being an individual in the eyes of GOD and become one with his spouse. Both callings - soldier and husband - require the individual to put the needs of the team above the needs of himself. Both require commitment and sacrifices.

There were times during my military career when I had to make sacrifices for the security of the nation, placing this above the stability of my family. As a husband and a father, I have to make hard choices to provide for my family. Sometimes these tough choices lead to regret and guilt. To this day, I truly regret missing the birthdays, sporting events, and family dinners during my deployments overseas. My family should have been my top priority, but I made a commitment to the nation when I took the oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies.

Military families face a number of challenges before, during, and after deployment. I was not prepared emotionally for this separation. I experienced a range of emotions during my first deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom. For instance the Army provides a soldier with



a long checklist of items to accomplish prior to each deployment. The morning I was to deploy, I found I had accomplished most of them but, I had failed to deal with separation from my family. I was so busy preparing myself to leave that I had not stopped to consider the impact of the deployment on my family. There is an old Army saying "If the Army had wanted you to have a family, the Army would have issued you one."

This deployment was different for two reasons: there were children involved and this tour was a combat in Iraq. My wife and I had two wonderful children: a son and daughter both under four years old, and one on the way. In our previous moves, we traveled together, which made the move like a family field trip to a new place. The uncertainty of the move was present, but we would all be together to get through it and face the challenges of a new duty station.

This deployment was to Iraq; 12 months without my wife and young children. Communications to the United



Alvin & Marie Jordan with kids (Jay 5, Nicole 2, and Vincent 1)



States were sporadic and infrequent. The thought of being away that long raised my anxiety level. I prayed hard to maintain my emotional well-being. To be honest, I cried some too. In my heart I believed that GOD had a plan for my family, and HE would take care of them. Yet it was still very hard to leave.

As a father, I had strong emotions about separation from my family. My first emotion was regret about all of the family events that I would miss, such as birthdays, first words, first steps, and numerous incidental moments as your children develop. Moments you will never get back because you were not there. I was fearful that I would become a stranger to my own family.

My second emotion was guilt. I worried how my wife would deal with the extended separation and burden of being mother and father while I was away. What would be my role when I returned? The uncertainty was paralyzing at times. Finally, there was resentment about the

choice I made. The situation I had put my family in. Who would raise my son? Who would teach him to throw a football? How would their lives be different, if I was killed in action and never returned? Would my daughter be upset with me for leaving? Would I be forgiven? I really had a hard time confronting the uncertainty of my return from this deployment.

But, GOD has a plan for all of us. I began to receive the sacraments in Iraq. I started to attend Mass and confession regularly. My wife encouraged me to pray the Rosary. My wife prayed and encouraged others to pray for the safe returns of service members around the world. My wife used her love and faith to make me a stronger man, husband and father. My relationship with Christ reduced my anxiety, improved my emotional well-being, and made my family stronger.



*Alvin L. Jordan, Jr. is a husband, father, and retired U.S. Army veteran of 22 years. He achieved the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Lieutenant Colonel Jordan was deployed to Ar-Ramadi, Iraq in 2004. He is the father of six children and currently serves as the chairman of the Pastoral Council at St. Philip Neri Catholic Church in Linthicum, MD.*



# Merry Christmas



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# THE POOR IN SPIRIT:

Living like the Holy Family at Christmas

Sr. Angela Marie Clare, lsp

It was December of 2014. At that time, I was an employee at St. Martin's Home for the Elderly in Catonsville. Christmas was around the corner, and the Little Sisters were starting to bring cheer to the residents with parties in each of the units. Watching from my office, I saw the sisters head into the residents' dining room pushing along a cart filled with cookies and hot chocolate, carrying gift bags, and singing Christmas carols. An idea came to me, and I knew I had to join in on the celebration. My parish young adult group was hosting an "Ugly Christmas Sweater Party" that evening. In my car, I had a green sweatshirt wrapped in tinsel, ornaments, and a battery-operated string of lights – when I pointed my arms in the air I looked like a Christmas tree! And so, with my sweatshirt on and a star in hand, I accompanied the sisters on their rounds. We had so much fun over those three days with my "ugly" sweater. The smiles and laughs from the residents were priceless! As the Christmas season was wrapping up, I started to have this

feeling that I wanted to be a "Christmas tree" the rest of my life. In other words, I wanted to spend my life doing what I could to make the residents happy. I had found my vocation; the following year I entered the Congregation.

It was during these initial encounters with the Little Sisters that I would begin to see Christmas from another perspective. I began to see the poverty of Christ and the simplicity and humility he calls each of us to live. Each year our homes receive a lot of donations around Christmas time from very generous individuals and groups in the community. The sisters enjoy sharing all that we receive! This is how the residents are able to receive a nice gift. Even employees have received nice gift bags at our Christmas party. I still remember how I accidentally received a bottle of men's aftershave! I was so tickled by this. I knew others that Christmas who were obliged to attend work parties at elegant hotels, but here in the simplicity of this gift-giving

which came through an act of poverty, there was such joy!

One of my favorite characters in the nativity story is the innkeeper. I often think he gets a bad reputation for having the Holy Family sleep in the stable. However, consider the situation with which the innkeeper had to contend. The census was in session; myriads of people were flocking back to Bethlehem looking for places to stay. I believe that the innkeeper was moved by compassion at Mary and Joseph's predicament. His inn was full but instead of just shutting the door and turning them out into the streets, he at least offered them a shelter. At that moment he didn't have much, but he gave what he had. It was a spirit of poverty, and in that poverty our Savior was born. God surprises us. In what little we have to offer, he still comes to us in the straw bed of our hearts! Isn't that so humbling? The King chose to become human just like us, to become one with our poverty and to raise us up with Him. I

would say that makes us very "rich in poverty!"

Religious Sisters take three vows: chastity, poverty, and obedience. As Little Sisters of the Poor, we also take a fourth vow of hospitality, which encompasses our care for our elderly brothers and sisters. There is a sacramental element to these vows. We have all learned that a sacrament is a visible sign of an inward grace. Our vows, while they express something that we do outwardly, are also a sign of what is happening interiorly. For instance, through poverty we give up our natural right of owning things. We don't take things for our own possession. What we receive is used at the disposal of the community or our residents. However, the goal of our poverty isn't on a material level – it is a means, but not an end. It goes much deeper. This material dispossession is a visible sign of the spiritual poverty that we are striving to live interiorly. Just as little children, we abandon ourselves into the arms of our Heavenly Father, trusting in Him, relying on His Divine Providence. In this poverty, we recognize that all we receive is a gift from Him and we are sustained by His grace alone.

St. Jeanne Jugan, the foundress of our Congregation, often would say, "See how Jesus, Mary, and Joseph loved one another, all three. In our little family, it must be the same." While the Holy Family did not have much materially, what they had was worth much more than anything: an authentic love for each other. Spiritual poverty includes

the notion of forgetting ourselves. I appreciate the self-sacrificial nature of my family. I think of all the little and big things my parents did and still continue to do for others out of need or just to see them happy. I think of all the times my mom would spend hours looking at greeting cards, trying to find the right message to send someone. Or how, despite my teenage glares, my dad would still faithfully bring me to school, and then at the end of the day would stop what he was doing to come and pick me up. Even

natural family, there are a lot of moments we have to sacrifice ourselves, our needs and desires. This is a poverty. What we have is at the disposal of the community, even our time and our talents. For instance, I may be on the way to do something, but I get stopped in the hallway by an elderly sister who needs help filling up the laundry soap dispenser. Or I may encounter a resident who is feeling a little anxious and needs someone just to stop and hold her hand or to sing a song with her to calm



Image by jty1117777 from Pixabay

when the drive became longer when I was out of state for college, he was always there.

It is this self-sacrificial nature of my family that continues to help me to live my vocation today. In a religious family, as it is with a

down. It is in these kinds of moments that Christ comes to us, as someone small, vulnerable, needing help. It may be just a little bit of straw, but the more straw we give, the warmer the Christ Child in the manger.



Sr. Angela Marie Clare, lsp (Conti) is a native of Glen Burnie, MD and Christ the King Parish where she was active in youth ministry. While in college studying Social Work she began to sense God calling her to the Religious Life. She entered with the Little Sisters of the Poor four years ago and made her first profession of vows in July of 2018. She currently resides at Jeanne Jugan Residence in Pawtucket, RI where she enjoys caring for, and learning from, the 100 elderly men and women who live with her and her Little Sisters.



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## Bible Quiz

Bible Quiz – John 1

The Gospel has 4 books – Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. The first three – Matthew, Mark and Luke are referred to as the synoptic gospels because they tell or corroborate similar stories and events about the life of Christ. The book of John is written quite differently. It focusses primarily on the fact that Jesus is the Word (or Logos), God Himself who took on human flesh. It is steeped in symbolism using images such as bread, light, sheep, water etc. John uses a poetic writing style, filled with theological richness.

- John uses exactly the same first three words used in the book of Genesis. What are the three words? (John 1:1)**
  - The beginning of
  - In the beginning
  - The book of
- John says that “the Word was with God.” What follows that? (John 1:1)**
  - God created the heavens and the earth
  - He was the light of men
  - And the Word was God
- Did the Word exist with God in the beginning or was God alone in the beginning? (John 1:2)**
  - God was alone in the beginning
  - He was in the beginning with God
  - The Word is the Holy Spirit
- What came to be through the Word? (John 1:3)**
  - All things
  - The world
  - Heaven
- ..... was in the Word who was with God? (John 1:4)**
  - Salvation
  - Love
  - Life
- When the light of Christ shone in the darkness, how did the darkness react? (John 1:5)**
  - it recoiled
  - it has not overcome it
  - it struck back
- Who did God send to bear witness to the Light? (John 1:6-8)**

John the Baptist  
John the apostle  
Peter
- Who was the true light that enlightens everyone? (John 1:9)**
  - John
  - Peter
  - Jesus
- The whole world was made by the Word, and the whole world recognized Him. True or False? (John 1:10)**
- What power did He give to those who accepted Him? (John 1:12)**
  - Power to heal
  - Power to become children of God
  - Power to overcome difficulty
- The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son. What was the Son filled with? (John 1:14)**
  - Salvation
  - grace and truth
  - love for humanity
- John tells us that no one has ever seen God. So who has revealed Him? (John 1:18)**
  - The Holy Spirit
  - Moses
  - The only Son

### Answers to Summer Edition

#### Matthew 25

- A – Ten brides
- B – They didn't bring extra oil
- C – I do not know you
- C – ability
- A – buried the talents in the ground
- C – he called him wicked and lazy
- B – all the holy angels
- B – all nations
- A - inherit the kingdom prepared for you
- C - you did it to me



We congratulate our friends,  
Mr. & Mrs. Manuel Ortiz as they  
celebrate their 40th wedding  
anniversary on  
December 8, 2019.  
Manuel y Martha, may God  
grant you continued happiness  
in your married life.  
Dios te bendiga!

**The FA Team**



## Litany to the Unborn Jesus in the Womb of Mary

V. Lord, have mercy on us

**R. Christ have mercy on us**

V. Lord, have mercy on us, Jesus hear us

**R. Jesus graciously hear us**

V. God, the Father of Heaven,

**R. have mercy on us.**

V. God, the Son, Redeemer of the world,

**R. have mercy on us.**

V. God, the Holy Spirit,

**R. have mercy on us.**

V. Holy Trinity, One God,

**R. have mercy on us.**

V. Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb  
of Mary,

**R. have mercy on us.**

+ Jesus, splendor of the Father in the womb of  
Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, eternal Wisdom entering time in the  
womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, Word made flesh, in the womb of Mary,  
**R.**

+ Jesus, living Bread from heaven in the womb of  
Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, Light of the world in the womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, Redeemer of mankind in the womb of  
Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, manifesting His Incarnation  
in the womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, uniquely human from the first moment of  
conception in the womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, subject to human development in the  
womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, whose Sacred Heart began to beat in the  
womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, whose Precious Blood first flowed  
through tiny veins in the womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, hidden nine months in the womb of  
Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, Bread of Life nourished by His Most Holy  
Mother in the womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, whose holy limbs first budded in the  
womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, whose Godhead the world cannot  
contain, weighing only a few ounces in the  
womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, infinite majesty, once measuring only  
tenths of an inch in the womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, helpless infant in the womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, raising His Mother to the heights of  
sanctity in the womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, delight of angels and saints in the womb  
of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, brightness of eternal life in the womb of  
Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, our Hope in the womb of Mary, **R.**

+ Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man in the womb  
of Mary, **R.**

### Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, in Jesus, your Word was born  
fully in human flesh. You have loved us from the  
first moment of our conception. Teach us to love  
one another as You have loved us. May we  
always protect the unborn, the vulnerable and  
the weak as if we were protecting You in human  
flesh. Give us the grace to know and do Your will,  
our only true happiness. And lead us on the  
narrow path to heaven where we will love and  
adore You for all eternity.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who is  
Lord forever. Amen.



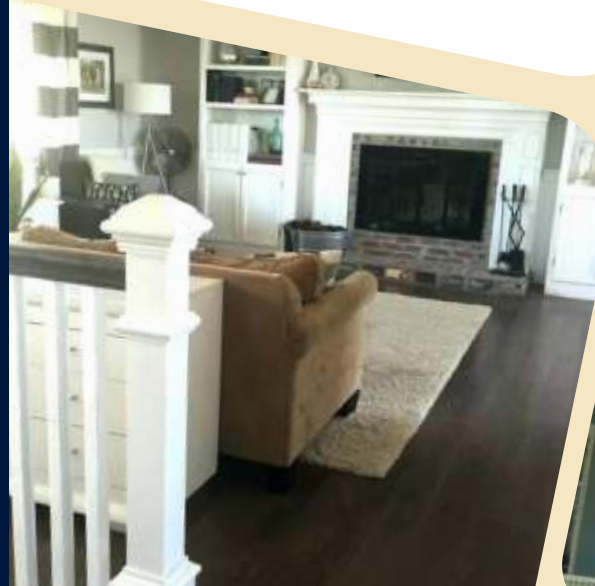
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