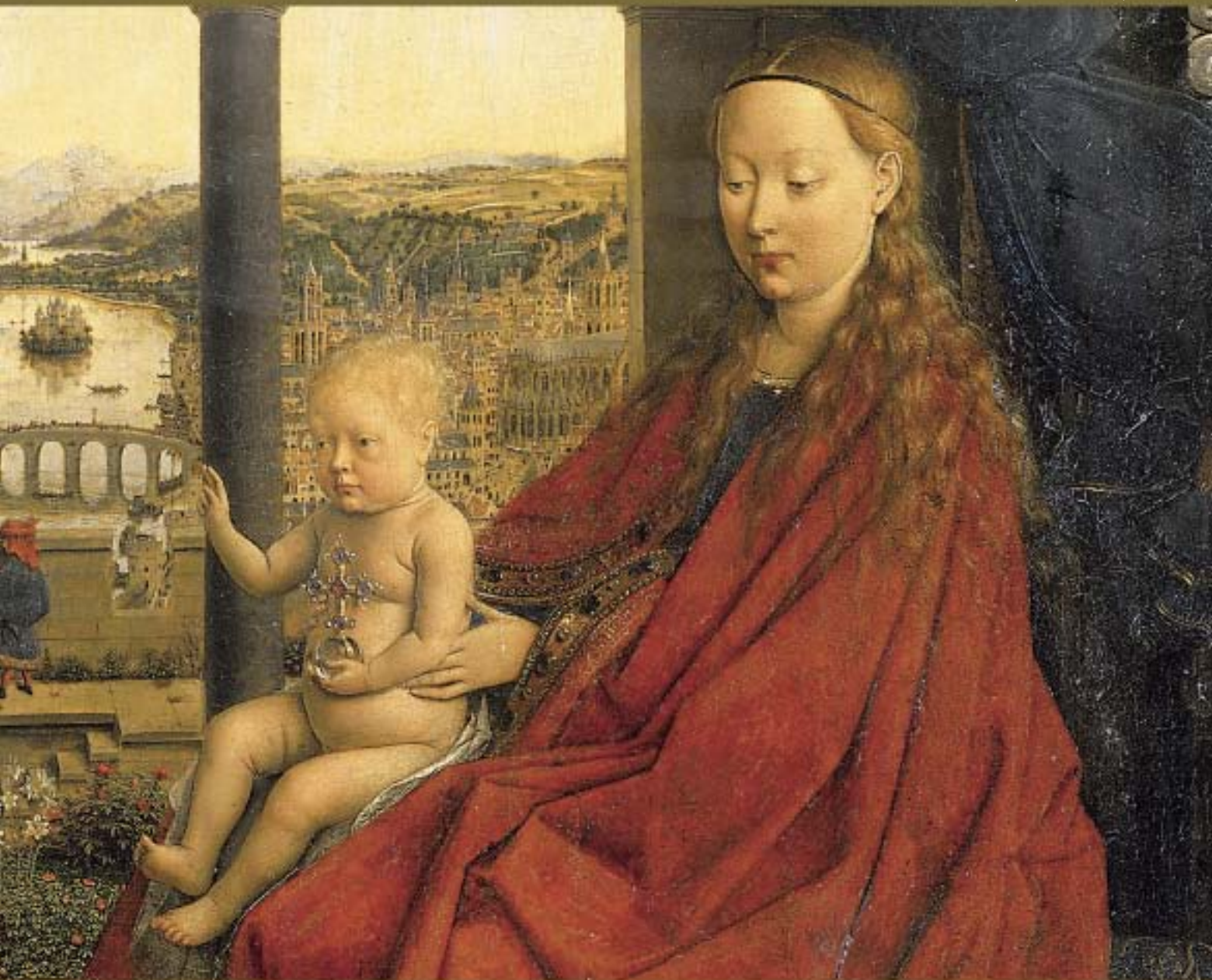


# America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

DEC. 19-26, 2011 \$3.50



*Christmas 2011*

I have a soft spot for top-10 lists—not the David Letterman variety, but the kind you find in the culture pages this time of year: top-10 films, books, TV shows, music albums, box sets. The list of lists seems to grow every year. It is largely a marketing ploy, of course, but I am an easy mark. My Christmas shopping is not complete until I consult the New York Times list of Notable Books or Entertainment Weekly's "must have" DVD's.

Still, I am growing wary of my mania for lists. More specifically, I am worried about how it shapes my cultural consumption. Take my film habit. With a toddler at home, I see fewer films than I once did, but I still try to see the "big films" of the year. Last year, for example, I saw every Best Picture candidate for the Academy Awards, even the gruesome "127 Hours." Yet was this the best use of my limited viewing time? Should I have been catching up on classic films or seeking out little-known documentaries? Or perhaps I should latch onto another, more reliable cultural arbiter, like A. O. Scott of The New York Times, whose top 10 lists always intrigue.

Then again, why let a critic be my lodestar? As someone who has written reviews of films and television, perhaps I have a responsibility to block out the critical noise as I determine what to write about. Forget the hype and concentrate on the work at hand. Let the art speak for itself.

This can be very difficult, especially in New York, where you can easily get swept up in the cultural tide. ("Have you seen 'War Horse' yet?") And there is no denying the romance of living in a city where the menu of weekend offerings includes de Kooning, Handel and von Trier. Yet all the buzz and hype can be exhausting. If I race to see every Pulitzer Prize-winning play or budding young soprano, I might miss something

smaller but very much worthwhile.

The same traps apply to reading. I relish the freedom of the casual reader, jumping from novels to nonfiction to potboilers. Yet I am too enamored of the latest Jeffrey Eugenides or Jonathan Franzen, less willing to trudge through the Great Books I still have not read. Last year, I read the Times's top five novels of the year, a neat accomplishment, I thought. Yet I did not read any Austen or Tolstoy.

Call it the tyranny of lists. By trying to keep up with the latest trend, I have little time to enlarge my cultural vocabulary. This is the role of formal education, of course: to build up your base of knowledge, to work your way through the canon. Yet unless you are a student in a Great Books program, chances are you will, like me, only graze at the edges of the Western literary tradition.

What to do? I am not a book club person, and I am not inclined to go back to school. Once I am assigned a book, my interest in reading said book diminishes rapidly. Perhaps I could set goals for myself. Alternate reading contemporary works with the classics. Or instead of reading the latest, say, Julian Barnes, start with his earlier, critically acclaimed work.

Ironically, one way to deepen one's reading habits is to write a book. Any reputable novelist reads widely in her own genre. Nonfiction writers must pursue a sustained course of reading. Yet I am not sure I want to go that route, at least not yet. Not every writer is called to write a book, even if it can help burnish a byline.

I think of my late friend and colleague, Daria Donnelly. She never wrote a book, but she was a voracious and intelligent reader. She once said that there are too many aspiring writers and not enough true readers. I think I now know what she meant.

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*Cover:* Detail from the Madonna of Chancellor Rolin (c. 1435), by Jan Van Eyck, portrays Rolin receiving a vision of the Virgin Mary while in prayer. Thumbnail of entire painting is on page 3 (bottom).

Credit: A detail from The Madonna of Chancellor Rolin (c. 1435) by Jan Van Eyck included in *Ars Sacra* © BEDNORZ-IMAGES, courtesy of h.f.ullmann Publishing.



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### Hooked on Drug Profits

Even as health care costs consume a greater share of the U.S. gross domestic product, some pharmaceutical companies are aggressively working to extend their patent protections on blockbuster drugs. Pfizer's cholesterol-reducing drug Lipitor, for example, has been hugely profitable; it accounts for a quarter of the company's revenues over the last 10 years. But the patent for Lipitor expired in November and generic drugs to lower cholesterol, like atorvastatin, are entering the market. Since after the first six months or year of start-up expenses generic versions tend to cost much less than brand-name drugs, the generics benefit consumers, insurers and the government, which subsidizes millions of prescription drug purchases through Medicare, Medicaid and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

To hold on to its market share as long as possible, however, Pfizer has made deals with insurers, pharmacy benefit managers and patients to sell its brand rather than a generic. The company has also promised discounts on co-pays, temporarily lowering its prices to keep the generic-drug makers from gaining a foothold.

If Pfizer's efforts succeed, the profits will serve shareholders at the expense of society at large, for the price of Lipitor will go back up. And if other pharmaceutical companies follow Pfizer's lead, the delay in transition to generic drugs could become costlier still. One pharmaceutical consultant reportedly said that more than \$80 billion in brand-name drugs are poised to go generic over the next two years. If the price falls to \$10 billion, he said, that would mean saving \$70 billion in health care costs. Whatever the actual price difference, federal regulators ought to scrutinize such deals now, lest the big pharmaceutical firms hooked on drug profits divert desperately needed savings in U.S. health care.

### Look to Black Catholics

A new report from the University of Notre Dame offers an optimistic look at an often-overlooked Catholic demographic: African-Americans. Commissioned by the National Black Catholic Congress, the first national Black Catholic Survey found that African-Americans are more engaged in their parishes than their white counterparts. Not only do many black Catholics attend Mass regularly, they also take part in other parish-sponsored events. What's more, many young black Catholics are also committed to their faith. "This is a bright spot for the church," said Bishop John H. Ricard, president of the National Black Catholic Congress.

In their analysis of the report, the authors conclude that "African-American Catholics behave and look like African-American Protestants," who have a long tradition of religious commitment. Here, then, is an example of a Catholic community that has flourished in America's ecumenical society. The Catholic Church's historical treatment of African-Americans has been mixed, but the majority of those surveyed felt that the church is meeting their needs today: 78 percent said that parishes served their spiritual needs "well or very well," compared with 67 percent of their white counterparts. Still, there are areas for improvement. Fewer respondents (62 percent) felt that the church met their social needs. And a majority felt that the church could do more to promote black saints and recruit black priests. It is disturbing, too, that a quarter of respondents "encountered people avoiding them or refusing to shake hands."

The example of African-American Catholics, who place less emphasis on "the individual and more on the communitarian aspects of a church," according to Bishop Ricard, should be held up as a model for all Catholics to emulate.

### A Long Goodbye

The Vatican's dogged pursuit of the Society of St. Pius X was rebuffed yet again in November when the society objected to the wording of a still mysterious "Doctrinal Preamble." That document is intended to begin the canonical reconciliation of the recalcitrant Lefebvrists with the church. Unfortunately, they seem to be holding out for a renegotiation of the Second Vatican Council.

What amazes is the Curia's patient attention to this grumpy micro-minority of schismatic Catholics. The enduring reconciliation campaign is disconcerting when throngs of nonschismatic Catholics—outraged parents, for example, and exasperated young women (including former altar servers)—drift away in search of greener pastures. Yet these ongoing losses have not provoked comparable intervention. Can anyone imagine Rome maintaining such forbearance in negotiation with, say, Call to Action or Voice of the Faithful? Unity is always welcome, but how much does the church gain from restoring these 19th-century romantics?

Surely the good shepherd searching for the lost sheep remains a standard of pastoral care. No one can deny the moral beauty of the shepherd's calculated risk-taking. But when the shepherd surveys his flock and spots one sheep straying over a hillside to the right while a third or more of

# Raise Up the Lowly

**D**awn breaks upon us. The Sun of Justice spreads his warming rays across a dark and icy world. The images of the Christmas season evoke liberation from oppressive times. They announce new life and a new order of things. “Justice and peace embrace.” It is a welcome message at all times, but particularly this year, the fourth since the Great Recession began.

While the official unemployment figures have only just dropped below 9 percent, the unofficial figure may be 16 percent or higher. Recent college graduates cannot find jobs. Discouraged workers have spent years looking for new work without securing it. Many seniors have either lost their pension benefits or have to make due with diminished savings. Governments and families are tightening their belts. Anxiety haunts the land. We sorely need the Light of the Nations to shine into our lives.

Christmas is intended for everyone, but it has a special relevance for the poor and oppressed, for God “lifts up the lowly.” According to the Gospels, Mary identifies herself as a “lowly handmaid.” The shepherds in the Judean hills to whom the angels reveal the good news live on the edge of Israelite society. The Holy Family has to seek out makeshift shelter for the Savior’s birth and then, as refugees, find asylum in Egypt. Later, Jesus begins his own ministry proclaiming “good news to the poor,” and his very first blessings are for the poor and the landless (the meek). These details of the Gospels are intended to appeal to the poor but also to draw the rest of us into their company as the new family of God.

Christmas is time for us to strengthen our bonds of solidarity with the poor, to join in God’s work of raising up the lowly. In the United States of 2011, this solidarity is needed more than ever. In New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg is attempting to deny access for single adults to city shelters unless they can prove they have no place else to go. In Maine, where 80 percent of homes are heated by oil, a 60 percent cut in federal subsidies for home heating fuel this year will expose the state’s sizable poor population to the cruelties of a Northeast winter. Using deceptive practices and robo-signing legal papers, banks foreclosed illegally on thousands of homes. After three years of economic distress, we can hardly speak any longer of “a social safety net.” For the poor and resourceless, it is “every man for himself.”

In an environment so hostile to the poor and working people, what can be done to lift up the lowly? How can we participate in Christ’s liberation of the oppressed? First,

even as we try to rebuild a dangerously unstable economy, we must resist every effort to blame the victims, whether the poor, workers or Occupy protesters, and instead create a public ethos that favors the common good.

Second, we should demand that government redirect needed spending cuts away from programs for the poor and take them instead from expensive giveaways to commodity producers, hedgefund managers and extravagant purchases of military hardware. If that is not enough, government can institute a Tobin tax on financial transactions, as the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace recently proposed, to fund poverty reduction and economic development.

Last, we can promote economic policies that, unlike those of the last 30 years, hold economic inequalities in check. For decades now the German social market economy has succeeded in producing prosperity with justice. We should be able to do the same in the United States.

For some years it has been fashionable to depoliticize the Gospel, to make Christ’s saving work solely a spiritual liberation from personal sin. In the history of Israel, however, religion and social justice were intermingled. The sin condemned by the prophets was social sin, and God’s fidelity to Israel was conditioned on people and king upholding justice in the land. The infancy narratives echo those same themes. Luke’s Magnificat holds a message of political renewal:

*He has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
and exalted those of low degree.  
He has filled the hungry with good things;  
the rich he has sent empty away.*

Details of Matthew’s Gospel, like Herod’s fear of John the Baptist and the massacre of the innocents, set Jesus’ birth and public ministry amid a political struggle. Taking up the challenge of social responsibility, therefore, is integral to full faith in the Incarnation. For, as the psalm of the Christmas Mass at Dawn declares:

*Light dawns for the just;  
and gladness for the upright of heart.  
Be glad in the Lord, you just,  
and give thanks to his holy name.*





ARAB SPRING

## Is Egypt the Next 'Iraq' For Christian Minorities?

**T**he explosion of sectarian tensions that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 has led, almost eight years later, to the devastation of Iraq's Christian minority. Over the years since Saddam Hussein was driven from power, at least 54 churches have in Iraq been bombed and 905 Christians killed in various acts of violence. Fewer than 500,000 Christians remain in Iraq; as many as 900,000 have fled. Now some Christians in Egypt wonder if the recent parliamentary elections there suggest a similar fate is in store for that Arab nation's ancient Christian community, now denied the protection of the deposed strongman Hosni Mubarak.

An estimated 100,000 Coptic Christians have already emigrated since Mubarak's ouster, according to the Egyptian Union of Human Rights Organizations. Coptic churches have been the targets of repeated, sometimes deadly assaults; and the suppression by the Egyptian military of a demonstration led by Copts in October led to 26 deaths. In the first round of voting for a new parliament in early December, the biggest winner was the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, with 37 percent of the vote. But the big surprise was the success of the Hizb al-Noor (Party of Light), backed by the extremist Salafist Islamists, which received 24 percent of the vote. A group of secular parties received about 25 percent.

The Rev. Antoine Rafic Greiche, an official spokesman for the Catholic Church in Egypt, said, "We were expecting the Muslim Brothers to do well, but we did not expect at all the success of the Salafists." He called the election results "a cause for alarm not just for Christians but for moderate Muslims, who will be very annoyed by what has happened."

The Coptic Catholic bishop, Kyrillos William of Assiut, Upper Egypt, said: "We have to wait and see what happens next. The secular and liberal parties are very young and they

may develop as time goes on, collecting more support."

Father Greiche said the Salafists "look at Christians and even moderate Muslims as Kuffars," a derogatory term for non-Muslims, "and say they want to implement the Shariah Islamic law rigorously."

Father Greiche said Salafists had taken responsibility for a number of attacks on churches. "The Salafists' attitude to Christians is to say that they can get their passport to go to the U.S.A., France, the U.K. or somewhere else in the West," he said. "They always talk about Egypt as a Muslim country, even though there are up to 13 million Christians living here."

That figure is a source of hope for Stephen Colecchi, director of the Office of International Justice and Peace at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, although he

acknowledges the U.S. church's continuing concern for the Christian minority in Egypt and other "Arab Spring" nations. Iraq's Christians were no more than 2 percent of the population, he said. The Coptic Church alone constitutes as much as 10 percent of the Egyptian population, and its historical and cultural roots go deep.

"It's hard to assess the situation from here," said Colecchi, who acknowledged that attacks on Christian churches were disturbing but seemed to be the work of "a fringe element."

"Generally there are relatively good relations between Muslims and Christians in Egypt," he said. Colecchi expects to know more after he consults with Christian leaders in January, when he will join Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson in Egypt as part of the Holy Land Coordination meeting.





A boy holds a machete during clashes between Coptic Christians and residents in Cairo in November.

## RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

### Obama Seeks 'Right Balance'

A White House spokesperson said the Obama administration is working to “strike the right balance between expanding coverage of preventive services and respecting religious beliefs” as it explores the wording of a religious exemption to a mandate of the Department of Health and Human Services that future health plans must cover contraceptives and sterilizations by Jan. 1, 2013.

“This decision has not yet been made,” said Jay Carney, an administration press secretary, responding to a reporter at a White House briefing on Nov. 29, who said he had heard from “lots of Democrats” who were con-

cerned about President Obama possibly granting an exemption to Catholic churches, hospitals and universities from the requirement that all insurance plans cover contraception.

“These Democrats, a lot of them in the abortion rights community, are concerned that this is even being discussed,” the reporter added.

Prompting the anxiety of pro-choice Democrats was a recent private meeting between Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and President Obama on Nov. 8 at the White House. Archbishop Dolan said later that he found the president to be “very open to the sensitivities” of the U.S. Catholic Church on issues related to religious freedom. By mutual agreement with the White House, further details of the meeting were not made public.

The controversy over religious exemptions for new women’s health guidelines emerged after H.H.S. Secretary Kathleen Sebelius announced an interim rule on Aug. 1 that would require all health plans to cover contraceptives—including two abortifacients—and sterilizations without co-pays as part of an upcoming expansion of women’s services. The new regulations included an interim exemption for religious employers that various Catholic and other faith-based organizations protested was too narrow. They argued that many Catholic institutions would not be protected and would be forced to discontinue health coverage for employees or else cease offering some social services, education or health care to the general public.

A 60-day comment period on the proposed religious

exemption ended on Sept. 30, and a final decision was expected from H.H.S. by the end of the year.

At least one bishop has said he would be forced to stop offering health insurance to his employees if the mandate remains unchanged. Speaking at the diocesan Red Mass at Sacred Heart Church in Tampa, Fla., on Nov. 30, Bishop Robert N. Lynch of St. Petersburg said that if government officials “fail to shift in their present positions, then 2,300 employees of the Diocese of St. Petersburg will lose their health care coverage, which they have come to treasure and rely upon.”

Bishop Lynch, whose diocese is self-insured, said he “would simply give them what we would have paid for their health care and tell them they have to look for coverage elsewhere.”

Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami addressed the issue in a column dated Nov. 29 directed to President Obama. Saying the administration was “running roughshod over conscience-protection provisions long part of the law of our land,” the archbishop added, “Regardless of one’s position on the morality of abortion, we—and elected officials on both sides of the aisle—should be concerned with these developments.”



An interim ruling from the Department of Health and Human Services has been viewed by U.S. bishops as an attack on religious liberty.

## Bishops, C.R.S. Challenge Pew Figures

According to “Lobbying for the Faithful,” a report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops spent \$26.6 million in 2009 on advocacy and outreach. The bishops, according to the report, were only beaten out by the \$88 million spent by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Pew also reported that Catholic Relief Services, at \$4.7 million, was the 19th biggest religious spender in Washington. The U.S.C.C.B. and C.R.S. said the figures were grossly overstated. Alan Cooperman, associate director for research at the forum, defended the study’s methodology and pointed out that the report included caveats about organizations that in addition to advocacy work were also large social service or relief and development providers. Forum representatives are meeting with officials from both agencies to resolve the dispute and Pew plans to offer new figures in a revision of the report.

## Vatican: H.I.V./AIDS Treatment for All

In a statement released for World AIDS Day on Dec. 1, Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, said that annual day of reflection and action on H.I.V./AIDS offers “a new opportunity to promote universal access to therapies for those who are infected, the prevention of transmission from mother to child and education in lifestyles that involve, as well, an approach that is truly correct and responsible as regards sexuality.” He called it also “a privileged moment to relaunch the fight against social prejudice.” An estimated 1.8 million people

## NEWS BRIEFS

Rhode Island’s Governor Lincoln Chafee’s decision “to avoid the word Christmas” in a public invitation to a statehouse “holiday tree lighting” ceremony “is most disheartening and divisive,” said Bishop Thomas Tobin on Nov. 29. + **Edward Louis Cleary, O.P.**, professor emeritus of political science at Providence College and a noted Latin American and human rights scholar, died on Nov. 21 at the Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas. + **Excessive focus on money** is destroying the environment and dehumanizing people, said Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga of Honduras, president of Caritas Internationalis, on Dec. 4 in Durban, South Africa, where he was attending U.N. climate talks. + In a fundraising letter to supporters, the Rev. Frank Pavone, the embattled head of **Priests for Life**, charged that “all of our work...indeed the very existence” of the pro-life groups “is in jeopardy.” + **Audits of six Catholic dioceses in Ireland** reveal “a marked improvement” in how the church is handling allegations of sexual abuse by clerics; but the findings, released on Nov. 30, also show that in the past too much emphasis has been placed on the rights of accused priests and protecting the reputation of the church.



“O Holiday Tree...”

still die every year because of H.I.V./AIDS, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa. “These are people who could lead normal lives if they only had access to suitable pharmacological therapies, those known as antiretroviral therapies,” Archbishop Zimowski said.

## Unemployment Down?

November unemployment numbers released on Dec. 2 indicated a decrease in joblessness from 9 percent to 8.6 percent. Most U.S. media treated that decline as good news, but behind the statistics is a less encouraging reality. The net employment gain in November was 120,000: 140,000 jobs gained in the private sector offset by 20,000 jobs lost in the public sector, as local, state and federal governments continue to shed workers. That

“growth” was barely enough to keep up with new workers entering the job market. Worse news was that 315,000 people dropped out of the workforce entirely. These are unemployed people so discouraged that they have stopped looking for work and have become ineligible for unemployment insurance assistance. Network, a Catholic lobby, argues that real improvement in the U.S. job market will require a more determined government response, since the U.S. private sector cannot absorb all those who are unemployed. Repairing crumbling infrastructure and hiring more teachers are just two ways the federal government could intervene to spur job growth.

From CNS and other sources.



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# Christmas U-Turn

Last winter, I drove alone in the early dark through some of Philadelphia's poorest, most blighted and most crime-torn neighborhoods. I was headed downtown to do some Christmas shopping, and as I drove I caught a glimpse of a group of African-American children, none dressed adequately for the damp and cold night weather, playing in a garbage-strewn lot behind a line of boarded-up row houses.

Just as I made my way past them and was turning onto the big boulevard, I heard "Merry Christmas!" The turn complete, I caught a sideways glimpse of a makeshift chorus waving to me across six lanes. "Merry Christmas!" they all shouted again, jumping as they called out.

The next moment, the silly Christmas oldie playing on the car radio suddenly went silent. Using the radio controls in the steering wheel of my luxury sport utility vehicle, I switched channels. Nothing happened; and there was no sign of the "no signal" light on the monitor. The dashboard lights seemed unusually bright. But still there was no sound. Then I noticed there was no stream of traffic going my way, not even a single car.

Weird, I thought. My mind went blank, and then the radio, which I distinctly thought I had turned off, came back on. Weirder still, I could swear that the second before it resumed I had started silently singing the very song that was now playing.

The middle chorus of John Lennon's "So this is Christmas" rang

out, wishing for a happy New Year "without any fear." I was never a really big Lennon fan, but I had always liked this song, even though it lifted and sank my spirits at the same time.

My mind raced my heart back to the image of the Christmas gift I had just received without deserving it. I grew up in what has since become a neighborhood as poor, blighted and crime-torn as the one my drive-by Christmas well-wishers call home. But I am not a typical well-off white suburbanite, right? And, in some years, I'd embroider my secret pride over still shopping downtown by stopping on the way at one of the inner-city, minority-led ministries I have helped to support in one way or another.

But then I realized that I had not done even that since my children, now all adults and on their own, were no older than the little ones I had just stolen a "Merry Christmas" from. I suddenly felt deeply stupid about my "I shop in the city for Christmas" conceit. And now I was being lectured harshly by Lennon, who was asking me melodically but pointedly whether I had truly done anything since last Christmas to ensure that the most needy children among whom I live are loved, cared for and happy "without any fear."

I kept driving. Maybe as a psychological (or was it spiritual?) defense mechanism, the social scientist part of my brain started to feed into my consciousness a stream of statistics that I had recently written into the outline of a research paper: America is home to

more than 11 million African-American children. The poverty rate among African-American children is about 35 percent. Rates of every socioeconomic ill from chronic hunger to violent-crime victimization remain extreme among low-income African-American children; and that is not all the bad news.

The grim statistics rattling in my head only made me feel more convicted.

Not enough  
people  
had truly  
cared  
enough,  
me included.

Earlier that very day I had lectured about how key government anti-poverty programs for "at risk" children had fallen apart in recent years; how the promise of expanded children's health insurance coverage had been hollowed first by inadequate funding and next by inadequate administration; and so on. But the lecture did not stress the reason for those failures that now engulfed me: not enough people had truly cared enough, me included.

With the image of those children waving and jumping now impossibly thick before me, I was almost in a trance when I made a jug-handle turn and pushed the speed limit back the other way as Lennon repeated his homily calling me to account.

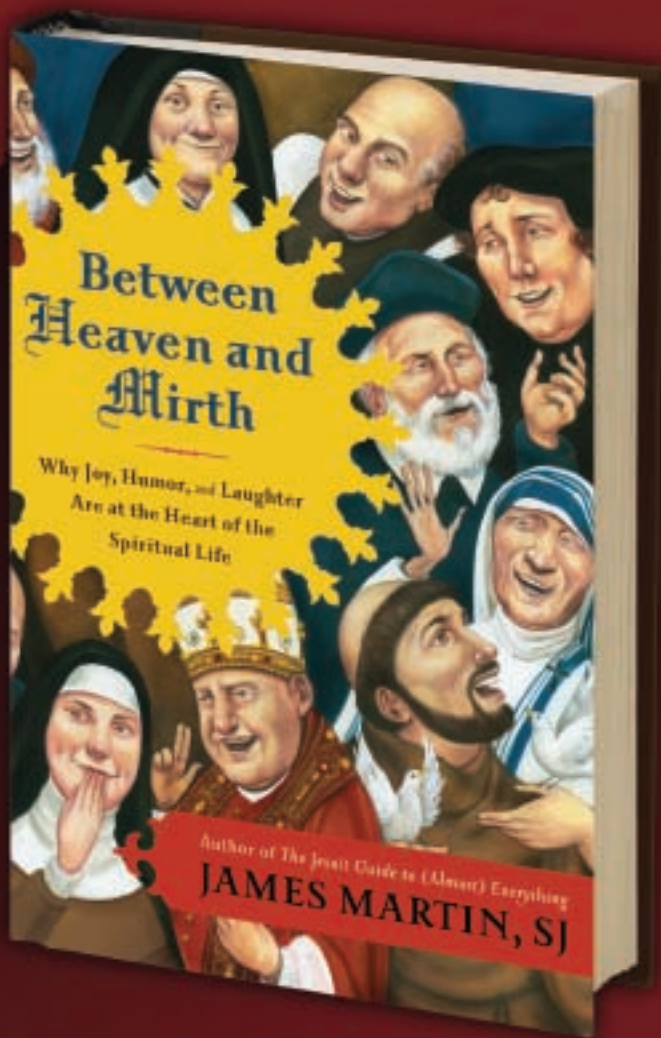
As I drove past the site where Christ had the holy children appear and call to me, I resolved to make 2011 a year for renewed dedication to them. I have driven past the same lot dozens of times in the past year, but I have yet to fully honor that resolution. I pray that I do, and that we all do, before next Christmas.

JOHN J. DIJULIO JR. is the author of *Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America's Faith-Based Future* (Univ. of California Press, 2007).



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*Rekindling the spirit  
of the Nativity*

The author's wife, Lauri, with  
Henry David, in Port-au-Prince,  
the week they met their children.

# The Weary World Rejoices

BY CHRISTOPHER PRAMUK

**W**hen I was a child, the stories of Jesus' birth captured my imagination. But as a young man growing up in the Catholic faith, the mystery of Christmas was mostly lost on me. As I grew, the Nativity story seemed fixed in centuries long past and spoke to realities that I assumed were long gone from the face of the earth. When I began studying theology, I learned to categorize the infancy narratives as myths, imaginative stories written to convey hidden truths but easily dismissed by the intellect. The Incarnation, God's love poured out "in the flesh" of Jesus, remained an abstraction, a doctrine that needed to be understood and explained, certainly, but hardly something one would *live*.

It was not until I became a father that the mystery of Christmas began to come alive in my heart. With the births of two children and the loss of two by miscarriage, the drama of "love becoming flesh" suddenly became real to me. I began to hear the Nativity stories through the ears of my heart, as it were, and to see through the eyes of my imagination. The Incarnation became less important as a doctrine than as a lifeline I could grab onto with both hands: God's palpable nearness in the fleshly stuff of an ordinary day. Today the birth narratives disturb and haunt me in their capacity to speak to a world that labors "in great darkness," to the hearts of a people grown weary with disappointment and scandal. The Nativity sustains me in hope and expectation.

## A Child Is Found

Two years ago my wife Lauri and I adopted two children from Haiti. Our adopted son, now almost 3, was born in Cité Soleil, a sprawling slum that stretches out over the bleakest sectors of Port-au-Prince. Immediately after his birth, the boy's mother, believing she had been impregnated by an evil spirit, abandoned her newborn in a latrine. A neighbor, appalled to find the infant submerged in feces, fished him out and brought him to his mother, insisting she take him to the local orphanage. By some miracle of grace, she did. Six months later, Lauri and I held the boy for the first time. Though determined to love him, we were apprehensive. Would we find any life or spirit in his eyes? We did. Today we spend our days chasing him around the house, laughing and sometimes cursing in the same

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUTHOR

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CHRISTOPHER PRAMUK teaches theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. He is the author of *Sophia: The Hidden Christ* of Thomas Merton (Liturgical Press, 2009).

breath. The child is a dynamo, a Cassius Clay in waiting and, according to our teenage son, a chick magnet. His name is Henry David, “beloved ruler of the household.”

In January 2010, my wife and I had officially been named adoptive parents to Henry and his soon-to-be sister, Sophia, then 7, but the pair were still living in a Haitian orphanage when a massive earthquake struck near Port-au-Prince, killing some 300,000 people and destroying most of the city’s buildings. The orphanage sustained damage, but none of the 130 children were harmed. In the following days the children lived and slept in the courtyard under a makeshift canopy. The 20 or so infants, Henry among them, were housed in the back of a box truck, converted into a nursery by the staff. Most of the staff members were local Haitian women, themselves mourning relatives and homes lost in the disaster. On the third day, armed looters breached the walls and raided the dwindling supplies of food, formula and bottled water. The women rubbed toothpaste under the children’s noses to mask the smell of corpses choking the air. They kept spirits high by singing spirituals and playing with the children.

Back in Cincinnati, Lauri and I slept little, prayed a lot and leaned on the support of friends and family. The sense of vulnerability nearly overwhelmed us. Before dawn on the 11th day after the earthquake, Henry, Sophia and dozens of other children from the orphanage made a harrowing trip by bus through the streets of Port-au-Prince to the airport, where they were loaded into the back of a military transport plane and flown to the United States. The next day they were welcomed by their new parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents and a host of aunts, uncles, cousins and family friends in an airport hangar in Denver. It was not exactly a manger, but there was not a dry eye in the house.

For every story like ours there are ten thousand more without a happy ending. Even ours is haunted by ambiguities. Can grace rise from the horror of an earthquake? I think often of Henry’s birth mother, praying that God has freed her from whatever dark spirits or abusive men once overshadowed her. But when I contemplate these two beautiful children who came to us “in the fullness of time,” from a chain of events and countless acts of selflessness well beyond my capacity to understand, I cannot help but fall mute in wonder. At times our noisy dinner table feels as if overshadowed by the wings of Gabriel himself, who invites us with each new day to say yes to the gift of love. This for me is the wonder, and the risk, of God’s incarnation in creatures who are free.

## God Who Is With Us

In one of his most haunting meditations on the Gospels, “The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room” (published in *Raids on the Unspeakable*), Thomas Merton reminds us that the narratives of Jesus’ birth are not merely comforting stories that appeal to the homely spirit of Christmas, calling us back to the simplicity and innocence of lost childhood.

The Nativity stories have a dangerously prophetic sting, or a spark that explodes into our precarious times, if we are able to hear them with the ears of our hearts.

The Gospel of Luke intimates that far from the centers of power and powerful men, Christ comes as a vulnerable child with nowhere to lay his head. What could this mean for the children of Cité Soleil for whom there is no room to live, no room to be loved, no room to laugh and play, no room to flourish? What hope might the Incarnation bear for those millions of children today who do not live so much as survive under the shadow of hopelessness: children and young people crowded into our nation’s bleakest schools and prisons; children hungry and traumatized in refugee camps across the earth; children traded as chattel in the global sex industry; children hiding inside our borders as “illegal aliens” or maimed and killed by U.S. drone strikes and then euphemized as “collateral damage”? The Gospel of Matthew, with its massacre of the innocents and flight into Egypt, links Jesus with the liberation brought by Moses. The child who heralds freedom and justice is feared by the profiteers of slavery and hunted by the long reach of powerful armies.

In the face of earthly powers, why put our faith in the innocent child of the Nativity, a child painfully “like us in all things but sin,” a vulnerable God *who can be killed*? The most honest answer may be that we do not. We put our faith in many gods, but too little in the one whose power is shown in mercy and whose love encompasses all persons, especially those, as Merton writes, “who do not belong, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated.” Thus our profound need for the Nativity stories: they “make room” in our imaginations for the divine child who lives in every child, irrespective of innocence or guilt, the Christ who hides in persons of every race, religion, nation and culture. These stories prepare our hearts for the Sermon on the Mount.

Perhaps the church draws nearest to the mystery of Incarnation when we the people of God gather in the darkness of Christmas Eve and sing “O Holy Night!”; that is when we feel the “thrill of hope” rising in our hearts and contemplate the God who comes in Jesus, who becomes the humility and defenselessness of our whole human condi-



Sophia, Lauri,  
Henry David



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tion. For a moment in and beyond all time, the soul feels its own worth and “a weary world rejoices.” For Lauri and me, the spirit of the Nativity draws palpably near in the lingering embraces of our kids at bedtime; she comes in the calming spirit that brings patience amid daily chaos; she overshadows us at night when the house grows still and we can rest again in the quiet of one another’s company. In the fullness of each new day God invites our participation in the life story of Love. In saying yes we discover our own worth.

## A Glorious Morn

The Nativity, then, is not only about the child Jesus. It takes a people to welcome and nurture a child, even a divine one. As Christ was born “in the fullness of time,” we must not forget the fullness of human receptivity and freedom that prepared the way for God’s advent in history and consummately in human flesh. First among the cooperators in this divine drama were the Jewish people, and from their womb came Mary and Joseph. Mary’s capacity to “be still” and attend to the Spirit’s call, like her courage in saying yes, had long been prepared by her ancestors in faith. So too was Jesus taught in the ways of prayer by his parents as “he grew in wisdom and in favor before God and human beings.” Mary’s was not the first Jewish heart, nor the last, to be pierced by the costs of prophetic obedience to

### ON THE WEB

Reflections on Christmas hymns.  
[americamagazine.org/video](http://americamagazine.org/video)

the Spirit. This is not the “obedience” of enforced certitudes but the free and more costly yes of covenantal partnership and heightened imagination. “See I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Is 43:19)

As a people of God still on pilgrimage in history, are we not also called to such obedience? Yet it seems that the general experience of Catholics in the church today is rather less like Mary and her prophetic forebears and more like that described so well by Drew Christiansen, S.J., several months ago: We are “numbed into acquiescence by the denial of participation, overwhelmed by unilateral decisions” (Am., 10/3). Has the Spirit of the Lord been vanquished by those entrusted to tend the vineyard? Have we died to hope where relationships seem broken or coercive beyond repair? Have we stopped expecting something new to steal in and transform

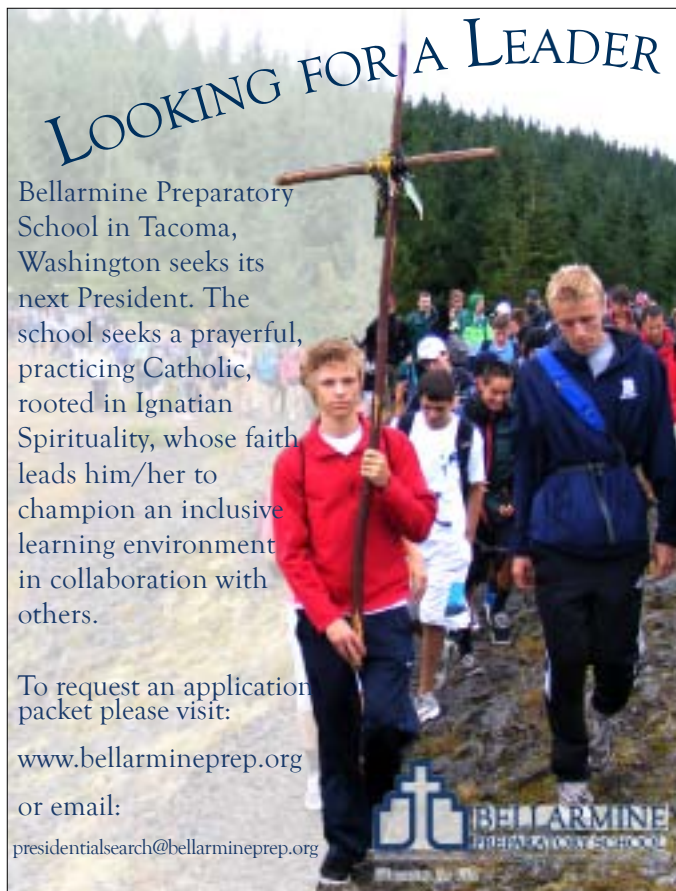
our weary church, our divided communities, our suffering planet? Perhaps our reality is not so different from that of Mary and Joseph, the ancient Hebrews or the disciples hiding in the upper room. The dark spirits

of power, fear and resignation still overshadow the divine child in all of us and churn their way relentlessly through the world.

To rekindle the spirit of the Nativity would be to pray for the grace of courage and hope that can transform us into a prophetic and joyful people. God is with us. No less than Mary, Joseph and all the apostles and saints, we too are the subjects of God’s incarnation and indwelling Holy Spirit. The “same mind,” the “same love,” the same “compassion and mercy,” the same “reconciliation of mind and fleshly body” that we have come to know in Jesus, and which reveal God’s glory poured out in all creation, are given fully to us by our baptism in Christ’s name and by the power of his Spirit (1 Phil 2:1-11). Is it wrong to take St. Paul at his word? The alternative, it seems, is to resign ourselves passively to a slow and frustrating death on the vine.

But where else shall we go? Something good and beautiful waits to be born in the flesh and spirit of our lives and, I want to believe, in the Catholic Church that I love and call my home. God trembles, I imagine, when we stop expecting the unexpected. “The power of the Most High will overshadow you.” Can we believe it? Better still, can we feel and imagine it?

In my own struggle to live prayerfully and hopefully in these difficult times, I have only to watch my son, Henry, romping around the backyard or splashing with joyful abandon in his bath at the end of a day to remember that miracles are happening here and now, in places like Haiti and in hidden places across the earth. But they never happen simply by divine fiat. On this holy feast of Christmas, we pray for the grace to discern the Spirit’s call and for renewed trust and fortitude to say yes. “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Lk 1:45). God invokes and awaits our participation. **A**



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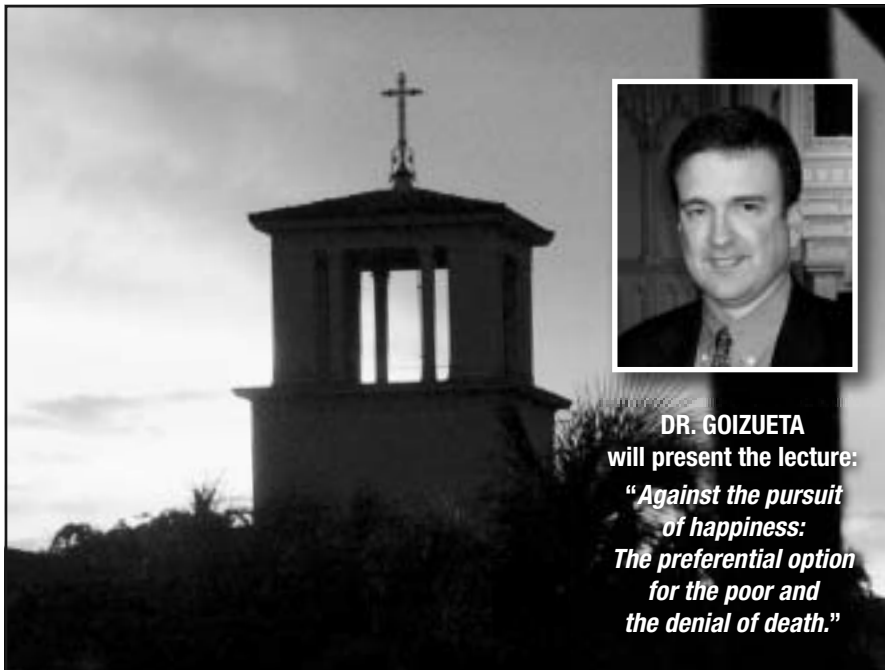
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## What Mary Knew

That he was beautiful,

love's most holy writ.

That he was the world in small,

and she loved it.

That he had undone death.

That he would be her joy.

That he would grow more beautiful

as he became a boy.

That he was grace in human form

and paradise to hold.

That he smelled like eternity.

That he would not grow old.

That he was heaven's gift,

dressed in flesh and baby clothes.

That he was wholly beautiful.

What every mother knows.

**ANGELA ALAIMO O'DONNELL**

*ANGELA ALAIMO O'DONNELL is a professor of English and associate director of the Curran Center for American Studies at Fordham University in New York City.*

*JANET MCKENZIE an artist in Vermont, is working on a new project called "African-American Women Celebrated."*

# BOOKS & CULTURE

PORTFOLIO | JUDITH DUPRÉ

## EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

*An inviting new book on the sacred arts*

**M**edieval pilgrims often slept in churches, finding respite there during their arduous journeys. But locals, too, had a wonderful familiarity with their churches, treating them as homes away from home. They bathed and did laundry with water drawn from holy wells and ate the food that merchants sold in the aisles. The

smoke billowing from the enormous censer at the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, for example, blessed not only the highly fragrant

pilgrims crowded inside but also local Christians.

Medievals touched, kissed and asked for the prayers of the saints portrayed in stone, paint and stained glass, who were rendered with such verisimilitude that they seemed alive,

like part of the family. Inside the church was a marvelous democracy of beauty that, like heaven,

was available to poor and rich alike. By the 19th century, as the church tried to suppress some superstitious practices, the familial relationship of the faithful

### ON THE WEB

A slideshow of images from *Ars Sacra*.  
[americamagazine.org/slideshow](http://americamagazine.org/slideshow)



The cover of *Ars Sacra* shows the Limburg Staurotheca, the reliquary of the true cross made in the 10th century and looted from a church in Constantinople.





to their churches began to devolve into a more formal, less lively relationship with the structure itself.

In 1898, centuries after the heyday of the medieval pilgrim, Frederick Evans, a former bookseller, discovered his life's calling: photography. In time, he built such a reputation as a photographer, particularly of the cathedrals he loved, that when he turned his camera's eye to Westminster Abbey, custodians moved the pews and furnishings so he would have enough room to work.

Like the pilgrims before him, Evans would live in a cathedral for weeks at a time. He would walk the church, through the nave, down the aisles, around the cloisters and into its far corners from early morning until sunset, observing the subtle changes in light and atmosphere. One can imagine him, lugging his equipment, framing potential images in his mind and waiting until the light descended into the darkness in just the right way before clicking the shutter and capturing a holy world. Evans sought to create "a record of emotion rather than a piece of topography," as he wrote in 1904. To do that, he had to become thoroughly familiar with the complex play of light and darkness that is the hallmark—beyond stained glass or flying buttresses—of the Gothic cathedral.

With a tenacity that would have drawn Evans's admiration, the German photographer Achim Bednorz logged some 93,000 miles over the past five years to take the 1,000 photographs that grace *Ars Sacra*, an overwhelming, beautiful new book (h.f.ullmann, 2011). This massive encyclopedic survey covers Christian art and architecture in Europe from its beginnings in the catacombs of third-century Rome

**Opposite: In the exuberant Rococo church of St. Chiara in Brà, Italy (1741-42), the architect Bernardo Vittone conjured a world beyond this one by incorporating a double-shelled dome. The inner dome is cut by windows that open to views of heaven and its holy occupants, painted on the outer dome.**



**The play of light and shadow in the Cathedral of St. Étienne in Bourges, France, (begun c. 1195) typifies the Gothic era. The light, filtered through immense fields of brilliant stained glass, illuminates the darkened nave.**

to the present day. Bednorz, who has photographed Christian architecture for nearly four decades, illuminates the inherent sanctity of the buildings and works of art he knows well and imbues their images with a sense of awe. His task, like that of Evans and every artist, was to understand how things look in order to re-present them in a way that transcends the material world.

*Ars Sacra* is organized chronologically, enabling readers to track cultural shifts and structural innovations. Overviews of soaring church interiors are coupled with minuscule details that recall the story of the cathedral artisan who, when asked why he would carve a bird high in the rafters where no one could see it, replied, "God can see it." This God's-



**Michelangelo carved the marble “Madonna of Bruges” (c. 1504) shortly after completing the “Pietà” that is now in St. Peter’s Basilica. This lovely detail of the Virgin’s hand resting on her lap shows the artist’s mastery of marble and of light.**



**A demon perched on a column in the 11th-century Church of St. Peter in Chauvigny, France, has a whimsical ferocity that would have delighted Walt Disney. Romanesque sculptors depicted the unending battle between good and evil with such carved monsters, inviting the faithful to consider their own beastly natures.**

eye view is extended by the decision of the editor, Rolf Tolman, to emphasize the most significant developments of a given period, highlighting, for example, Romanesque sculpture, Gothic structural technology and Renaissance painting.

This is a book for the ultimate arm-chair traveler, although, since it weighs in at nearly 25 pounds, a table is needed, too. Hauling this tome from study to dining room and back renewed my appreciation of the literal and metaphoric heft of the visual arts, a precious legacy and wellspring of Catholic devotion.

Architecture, like photography, and like faith, is a creature of light. The world as most of us know it would cease to exist without light, which gives form to its visible dimensions. “Even a room which must be dark needs a crack of light to know how dark it is,” noted Louis Kahn, the modernist architect. Time is also shaped by light, its passage apparent in light’s evanescence—shifting, coming and going—a fleeting quality that moves us because it mirrors our brief time on earth. Light cannot be understood apart from darkness; knowledge of one depends on the other.

During the Advent season, as the days shorten, we fill our churches and homes with candles that focus attention on the light in the darkness, while acknowledging just how dark the dark can be. We reflect on the birth of light, the new light—Christ—remembering that Christ came into the world of visible realities to illuminate what cannot be seen. All the beloved symbols that accompany our celebration of Christ’s birth—the star, the crèche, the straw, sheep and camels—remind us that redemption is embodied and takes place in a world, now illuminated, that we can see.

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JUDITH DUPRÉ is the author of *Full of Grace (Random House)*, *Churches and Monuments*.



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## ROCKS OF AGES

### TEN POPES WHO SHOOK THE WORLD

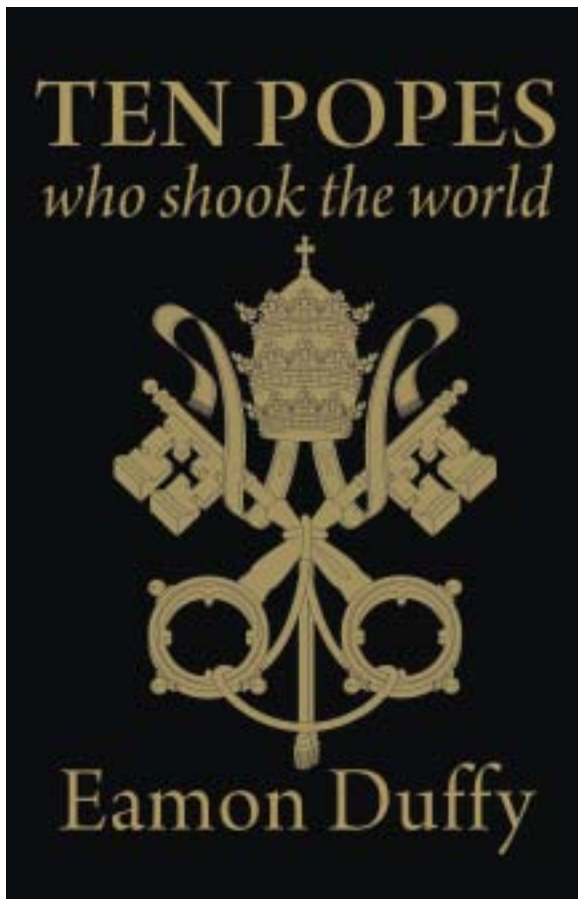
By Eamon Duffy  
Yale Univ. Press. 160p \$25

Eamon Duffy's latest book originated as a series on BBC. That fact alone should be enough to persuade you to buy it. Not only is Duffy an elegant stylist; he is the best qualified person in the English-speaking world to write on the subject. You will not, therefore, be disappointed in these 10 sketches that begin with St. Peter and end with John Paul II. In between are five of the usual suspects—Leo the Great, Gregory the Great, Gregory VII, Innocent III and John XXIII.

Less obvious as world-shakers are Paul III, Pius IX and Pius XII. They are also the most problematic. Of the three, the one I know best is Paul III (1534-49), who, among his other claims to fame, can boast patronage of Michelangelo. He is best remembered, however, for finally, after overcoming seemingly insuperable obstacles, convoking the Council of Trent. But he also gave impetus to a renewal of Catholic spiritual life by approving several new religious orders, of which the most important were the Ursulines and the Jesuits. Some scholars see in his pontificate, therefore, the beginning of modern Catholicism. Duffy in the few pages at his disposal is able only to hint at Paul's dark side and at the disruptive machinations of his children and grandchildren that marred his record.

Pius IX (1846-78) remains a con-

troversial figure in Italy because of his opposition to Italian unification. He is controversial more broadly, despite his recent beatification (2000), because of



his reactionary pronouncements on church policy. No doubt, however, his convocation of Vatican Council I (1869-70) and his vigorous promotion during it of the doctrine of papal infallibility left an indelible mark on the church.

Duffy's treatment of Pius XII was for me the most intriguing in the book. Ever since Rolf Hochhuth's play, "The Deputy," opened in Berlin in 1963, the pope has been accused time and again of complicity in the Holocaust because of his failure to denounce it. This accusation has just as many times pro-

voked vigorous defenses. The guns are still blazing from both sides. To write on Pius is to enter a battlefield. Duffy is judicious, but I was a little surprised, which does not necessarily mean displeased, by his stance. (I won't give the plot away!)

Before I opened the book, I tried to make my own list of 10 popes "who shook the world." I came up with only one, Gregory VII (1073-85). He made Duffy's list, as he would make the list, I think, of just about any student of the history of the West. Then I wracked my brain and came up with four more—Stephen II (752-57), Leo III (795-816), John XXII (1316-34), and John XXIII (1958-63). Of these four, on only John XXIII did our lists coincide.

What a cantankerous lot, we historians! But in this case I was not so much being cantankerous as interpreting "shaking the world" in a more literal sense than Duffy. He understood the expression to mean that each of these popes encapsulated one important aspect of what the papacy has come to be. Understood thus, my list would come to look a lot like his.

In his introduction, however, Duffy with an impish touch derails both his list and mine by quoting a provocative, half-serious passage from a book by P. J. FitzPatrick, in which FitzPatrick singles out the "six founders of the Roman Church as we know it": the Emperor Claudius, Gregory the Great, the Prophet Mohammed, Martin Luther, Napoleon and Sir Charles Wheatstone.

I hope you're tantalized.

JOHN W. O'MALLEY, S.J., *university professor in the theology department at Georgetown University, is the author of A History of the Popes (Sheed and Ward) and What Happened at Vatican II (Harvard Univ. Press).*



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## LETTERS

### On Your Knees, Americans

In "To the Ends of the Earth," his review of the Rev. Robert Barron's television film "Catholicism" (11/21), Maurice Timothy Reidy writes: "Yet in general the film fails to convey that the church is a living tradition, one that continues to inspire artists, musicians and writers, as well as young theologians and lay ministers. Shots of worshippers in Mexico and the Philippines are not enough to capture the vitality of the church today." Are you kidding me? Unfortunately for North America and for Europe, the vitality of the church today is precisely in Mexico and the Philippines. Does the United States halt daily at 3 in the afternoon to pray for divine mercy? Filipinos do. Do penitent North Americans crawl for miles on their knees in supplication for the intercession of the Blessed Mother? The pilgrims to Our Lady of Guadalupe do, and we would be wise to follow.

DIANE PENNEY  
*Birmingham, Ala.*

### Reasons for War

If in your editorial "War Is Not an Option" (12/5) you cannot assess the practical threat from Iran, I would suggest the problem may be in your lack of military assessment skills. The attempt to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States on U.S. soil is only the most recent *casus belli*. Several years of Iranian support for attacks on U.S. troops as part of our occupation in Iraq are also cause for war, as is supplying missiles to international terrorist groups. If you

cannot see these causes, how can you assess the chance of success of a strike? One does not further the cause of peace by pretending the reasons for war do not exist, but by presenting them and defeating them, showing how peace is practical and preferable.

T. M. LUTAS  
*Munster, Ind.*

### Consumption Is Good for You

I wish that Kyle T. Kramer ("A Better Life," 11/21) had attempted to reconcile his rejection of the "Gospel of More" with the needs of today's economy.

We may wish that we spent less on goods and services we don't need, but we spend less at a high cost to businesses and the private sector generally at a time when, as a good Keynesian will tell you, we need to increase demand for those goods and services in order to spark the employment this country desperately needs.

Consumerism for the sake of excessive consumption is to be condemned. Fewer and fewer Americans can afford

to indulge in that kind of consumption. But without consumerism, this economy will suffer.

BRIEN KINKEL  
*Silver Spring, Md.*

### From Wisconsin to Honduras

I appreciate Stephen J. Pope's "From Condemnation to Conversion" (11/21) and what it has to say about restorative justice in Wisconsin. We who participate in the prison ministry here in Honduras know of restorative justice only in theory, since here the interest is in retribution because of the state laws broken. My interest is to bring a similar workshop to Honduras. I will share your article in the national assembly of prison ministry this coming week.

ROBERT DAVID VOSS, S.J.  
*El Progreso Yoro, Honduras*

### Orwell Is Not the Answer

Re your editorial "A Spirit-Led Future" (12/12): There are about one billion Catholics in the world. Of them, one million are members of the clergy or religious orders or have some

**America** (ISSN 0002-7049) is published weekly (except for 12 combined issues: Jan. 3-10-17, 24-31, May 2-9, June 6-13, 20-27, July 4-11, 18-25, Aug. 1-8, 15-22, Aug. 29-Sept. 5, Nov. 28-Dec. 5, Dec. 19-26) by America Press, Inc., 106 West 56th Street, New York, NY 10019. Periodicals postage is paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices. Business Manager: Lisa Pope; Circulation: Judith Palmer, (212) 581-4640. Subscriptions: United States, \$56 per year; add U.S. \$30 postage and GST (#131870719) for Canada; or add U.S. \$54 per year for international priority airmail. Postmaster: Send address changes to: America, 106 West 56th St. New York, NY 10019. Printed in U.S.A.



CARTOON BY BOB ECKSTEIN

other institutional role. So the problem is not in institutions but in the Catholic people. Institutions, starting from the Vatican and going down to the local organizations aimed at serving the people, have lost impact on the spiritual lives of the laity. Emphasis was put on commandments rather than on developing rich spiritualities. It is time to abandon the George Orwell, 1984-model of the church and to move to one of small groups, local

communities, which take over the responsibilities of living by the Spirit. Express this spirit in nongovernmental organizations serving the poor, sick, prostitutes and tax collectors as Jesus did in his days on earth.

GERMAN OTALORA-BAY  
Oaxaca, Mexico

### What the Author Left Out

While John O'Malley, S.J., has a valid point about exchange between theolo-

gians and bishops ("A Lesson for Today," 10/31), there are several things wrong with his premise.

He says how wonderful Trent was for these exchanges, yet that council was the one that pronounced 127 canons declaring people who questioned its authority to be anathema—"condemned to eternal fire with Satan" according to the Pontificale Romanum. Not a particularly Christian viewpoint.

Second, he limits the discussion to theologians and bishops. I think that the *sensus fidelium*, the view of the people of God, would be just as valid as, if not more valid than that of bishops and theologians. Theology is the ideas of men, not of God. The people are dealing with the practice of Christianity, not the pronouncement of it, and I have found the theology of our communities to be far stronger than the pronouncements of the men who claim authority. Perhaps they should listen some time.

DENIS NOLAN  
Daly City, Calif.

### Thank You

Bravo for the courage and consistency in your editorials. Thank you for taking the bishops to task for their inconsistency in pleading for religious freedom while they demonize disagreement and conceal criminal activity. Thank you for showing how Penn State can be an example of dealing with the second and greater abuse, the concealment and subterfuge exemplified by most of the hierarchy's response to sexual abuse by clerics (11/28).

Bravissimo also for taking pre-emptive war with Iran off the table as an option in the face of folks who hide American imperialism under the cloak of just war theory (11/28). Thank you for your Christian position on undocumented immigrants (12/12). You give me hope in Advent.

(REV.) JOSEPH OECHSLE  
East Norriton, Pa.


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# The Gift of God

CHRISTMAS (B), DEC. 25, 2011

Readings: Is 52:7-10; Ps 98:1-6; Heb 1:1-6; Jn 1:1-18

*In the beginning was the Word (Jn 1:1)*

‘I give you my word.’ I cannot think of another way of framing something to convey that one’s honor, integrity and perhaps even something about one’s very essence are on the line. *Word* is a dense and powerful term. It is considered to be so worldwide. Many Hindus, for example, think the universe was created and is sustained by the power of the Sanskrit word. Plato likewise considered the word (*logos*) as the ordering principle through whom the divine created the world. Philo, the ancient Jewish intellectual, imagined it as the rudder by which God steers the universe.

The Old Testament expresses the power of the word in wonderful ways. Words cause things to happen. In Genesis, God creates by the fiat of his word: “Let there be light.” Think also of Jacob acquiring from Isaac by deception the blessing that was meant for Esau. Once spoken, the word of blessing could not be revoked. *Word* was also used to mean God’s revelation and even God’s presence in a person’s life.

Given the depth and profundity of the term, it is no mystery that John begins his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Later we hear, “All things came to be through him.... What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race.” So far so good, even according to the world’s wisdom.

---

**PETER FELDMIEER** is the Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Toledo.

Then we hear the shocker: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” This is more than just a game-changer. Now what is impossible—the absolute union of Creator and creature, the eternal and the mortal—has been achieved; “for God, all things are possible” (Mt 19:26). Karl Rahner, S.J., once reflected on this: “Incomprehensible God, adventurer of love!”

God as Word took on the ultimate adventure by entering time and becoming one of us.

With this in mind, the phrase “I give you my word” takes on a whole different dimension. Now it refers to more than God’s honor or integrity or even something of God’s very essence. The Word who created all things and is the light to all things is now dwelling within us. It is the gift of God himself.

When you think of the babe in Bethlehem, think also of the adventure from God’s point of view. God became utterly vulnerable in Jesus so that he might bring light to our darkness. And at what cost! Already John tells us that the incarnation of God is one of conflict between light and darkness, acceptance and rejection. And for us it marks the difference between becoming children of God and staying lost in the night. John tells us that those who came to believe in him saw “his glory...full of grace and truth...grace in place of grace.” And yet those in dark-

ness “did not know him.” God’s Word challenges us to make life-altering choices.

John makes it clear that the message of Christmas is not only about the Word’s birth among us. It must also be about our birth in God. At Christmas we cannot remain at the crib, as amazing as this is. Christmas faith embraces the light, becomes infused by the light, lives the light.



## PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- Consider how God’s light shines most through you.
- What are specific ways your darkness has not let him in?
- Think of one substantial way you can let his light in.

This divine light shines in our gentle love of neighbor. It shines in our prophetic defense of the marginalized, the powerless, the immigrant (“for you yourselves were once aliens,” Ex 22:21). It shines in the joy shared from knowing that we are utterly and irrevocably loved by a God willing to empty himself that we might have his indwelling Spirit and share his glory.

My Christmas prayer is that the divine Word that created us and enlightened us may now dwell powerfully within us. May it speak in and through us and fully manifest itself in our lives.

Merry Christmas.

ART: TAD DUNNE



# Reflecting Love

MARY MOTHER OF GOD (B), JAN. 1, 2012

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

*Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart (Lk 2:19)*

**I** tell my students not to think of the Incarnation as though God the Father contributed some kind of divine Y chromosome and Mary contributed the human X chromosome, making Jesus both human and divine. This would make Jesus something of a half-breed and more like Hercules than the biblical savior. In a handout, I try to correct this misconception with the following statement: “The supernatural infinite ground and infinite horizon of transcendentalism became intrinsically identified with Jesus of Nazareth from the moment of conception.” (Note to self: Must change Christology handout.)

This solemnity of Mary the Mother of God draws us to important truths of the mystery of our faith without torturously trying to explain them. Calling Mary “Mother of God” reflects our belief that Jesus was not merely adopted by God and raised up to some kind of divine status. Rather, Mary’s son had a fully divine nature from the beginning. And even with two natures, Jesus Christ is a singular being, with Mary as his mother.

If all this is challenging for us to imagine, think about what it meant for the Blessed Mother. Luke’s Gospel takes us to the stable. Neighboring shepherds had come to see the newborn Messiah and Lord, whom the angel had announced. Luke tells us that they reported all that had been revealed about this child. This would then include a massive heavenly choir singing God’s praises. Luke tells us,

“Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.”

The Gospel reading then reports that on the eighth day the child was circumcised. This is important. Jesus’ circumcision takes us to the second reading, in which Paul tells us that he was “born under the law, to ransom those under the law.” Paul teaches in Galatians that the law was a blessing from God, one that trained in holiness. But the law worked like a holding pattern until the savior would come to bring life in the Spirit. Paul teaches here that it is this Spirit dwelling within our hearts that proclaims our new relationship with God: “Abba, Father!”

Finally, Luke tells us that they named the child Jesus, the name Gabriel had given Mary at the Annunciation. The name Jesus (Yeshua) means “God saves.” This is no small matter. In the Bible, names are potent. They often reflect a person’s identity. Obviously that is the case here. It is heady stuff to call your child by a name that means “God saves,” as Gabriel had commanded.

Mary keeps and reflects all this in her heart. The mystery of the Incarnation and her role as mother of the Savior are not something she analyzes or philosophizes about. Rather, as Luke says, she enters the mystery contemplatively. We should follow suit in meditating on this mystery and what it can mean for us.

I would like to offer two reflections in particular. The first is how marvelous it is that this cosmic event, one

that made heavenly hosts praise God, occurred through poor pilgrims in a stable in a small town. It leads me to think of the many ways extraordinary grace happens in the ordinariness of life. I see the Spirit of the risen Christ revealed all the time—by Rosemarie, for example, who directs a homeless shelter called Listening House. She deeply loves the guests there, even the drunks, even the ones who swear at her. How does she do that? And in radiating that love, she helps the down-and-out to glimpse a reflection

## PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

- Think of a time or event of grace in your life.
- How did you come to recognize this as a graced moment?
- Imagine Mary praying for you as your mother.

of their own lovability. What a gift! And that miracle happens every day.

We might also reflect on Mary’s role as mother to us. We received her as our mother from the crucified Lord in the person of the beloved disciple: “Behold your mother” (Jn 19:27). We receive Mary as our mother to the degree we know Christ as our Lord and brother. We receive her when we realize that her maternal love is working right now on our behalf so that the kingdom of her son and savior might be fulfilled in us. There is much to reflect on in our hearts.

**PETER FELDMEIERS**

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