"Think Tank"

Commentaries

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2019

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WHAT THE MAGI TEACH OUR JOYLESS, OUTRAGED SOCIETY

(January 10, 2019)

After Mass celebrating the Epiphany, a parishioner commented that we live in a joyless society. His thought was part cultural critique, part affirmation of my homily. It bears further consideration that may lead to a worthy new year's resolution.

The worshipper's remark rings true with others. Lance Morrow recently opined in *The Wall Street Journal* that "America is addicted to outrage" as the signature emotion of public life today. The nightly news provides ample evidence for his claim that "the greatest casualty of outrage may be judgment itself."

That claim also applies to the Church. There, outrage masked as defense of the faith follows from, and contributes to, an ethos of "us vs. them" applied even to fellow believers. As Fr. Paul Scalia once described it, the "Church militant" risks becoming the "Church belligerent."

These essayists note a connection between our joyless state of affairs and the rise of new communications technology. With supposedly "social" media, we can be anything but. Forgetting that at the other end of the digital fibers are real people, we increasingly tweet or post in ways that we would hesitate to do were the person(s) we are talking about standing in front of us. Drawn downward to the miniaturization of interaction made possible by devices, we fail to see the bigger picture of meaningful human encounter.

Actually, this is nothing new in the realm of faith. In *The Reform of Zeal*, a study of religious culture at the time of the French "wars of religion," Tom Donlan points out how Catholic belief turned militant in its strident belligerence not only toward Protestant reformers but also against fellow Catholics. It even turned inward, promoting a self-awareness of "eschatological anguish" and a resultant need for harsh penitential discipline.

Donlan then lays out the convincing argument that the spirituality of "gentleness" (*douceur*) championed by St. Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva and Doctor of the Church, constituted an effective critique to such religious militancy. Redefining the fervor of devotion away from fanaticism, de Sales formed believers through the Good News of a God who affirms His identity in Jesus as one "gentle and humble in heart" and who invites people to "come to me" for rest because "my yoke is easy and my burden light" (Matt 11:28-30).

That's the Good News we celebrated at Christmas. Coinciding with the joyous sights and sounds of the holidays, the proclamation of the Nativity is intended to last longer than the season that has come and gone.

The biblical stories during the Christmas season speak of the joy that attends a child's birth, the swaddled infant who, as yet, has not said or done anything of historic note. Still, his mother's spirit rejoices, but she had insider information on who this child really is. Likewise, shepherds rejoiced at the visual confirmation of an angelic message, though theirs could be construed as a fascination born of curiosity amid the boredom of a night watch.

Then the Magi arrived. Their joy seems different. It appears as a conviction, born of the choice to follow a star that inspired them to travel to a foreign land, at night, seeking someone they didn't even know. That joy enables them to overcome the resistance of reason and to persist in their search, despite the unknown destination, the fearful darkness, and the troubling resistance from others.

The joy of the Magi holds the antidote to a culture of outrage. Their discovery of the humble and gentle Jesus changes everything, for them and for us.

The three "wise" travelers found joy by looking up, literally, to the heavens. Figuratively, they learned to look up as a matter of faith.

And when they did, they saw a picture bigger than themselves and discovered a world greater than their own positions. They laid eyes on a child, simply born and lovingly lain in a manger. They discovered the king of all peoples in the Son of God who chose to be present in the midst of human beings, just as they (we) are. And they did him homage.

That act holds the key to eradicating outrage and mitigating militancy. Social and religious zeal will be reformed when we learn, as did the wise men, to kneel before Him who is God-with-us (Emmanuel).

Resolving to spend time in adoration of the blessed sacrament of God's continuing presence among us, we, too, can find a joy that lasts beyond the holidays, the joy which alone will bring rest to our hearts and souls.

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POKING FUN AT THE PRESS, POPE USES HUMOR TO SPREAD GOSPEL (February 7, 2019)

Not every word a pope speaks is "*ex cathedra*." In fact, it's quite rare to proclaim something "from the chair" (of St. Peter) as a matter of authoritative teaching in the realm of realm of faith and morals.

Nowadays, much of what Pope Francis communicates comes when he is standing. Take, for example, the Popemobile. Alessandro Gisotti, the director of the Holy See's Press Office, highlighted the message recently received on the streets of Panama, in the image of so many young people "who hugged each other after having seen you only for an instant."

The pope also stands when speaking with the press. During those in-flight events, we see another distinctive way the pope communicates. As he has done on previous trips, the Pope Francis likes to poke fun at the press.

On the flight to Rome following World Youth Day, in answer to a question about why young people distance themselves from the Church, he replied, "generally I think that the first [reason] is the lack of witness from Christians, priests, bishops." Then he remarked, "I do not say Popes because that's too much." And he laughed, then promptly added "but also them."

Later, he was surprised by a reporter who referenced the pope's lunch with young pilgrims and then proceeded to ask about expectations for the upcoming meeting of bishops to discuss the global crisis in the Church. With a wide grin and an appreciative nod, the pope quipped, "This one is clever! He began from the trip and then went there ... well done! Thanks for the question," which he then answered freely.

On the return flight from Abu Dhabi, Pope Francis offered his impression about a little girl who broke through the security line and ran to the pope-mobile. He expressed amazement, saying, "That little girl is courageous! ... That little girl has a future, a future! And I would dare say: poor husband!"

Before that press conference ended, in keeping with custom, the Holy Father congratulated one of the journalists who was on board her 150th papal flight. When the crew brought out a cake, he said: "They told me we are celebrating Valentina's 150th birthday! ... But I don't see her so mummified." The video doesn't show the exchange, but we can presume Valentina laughed along with the others.

Some may think the world's spiritual leader should not joke around. Seen in another perspective, however, humor can be virtuous. When it is, communication benefits.

In his *Introduction to the Devout Life* (III:27), the eloquent Doctor of the Church, St. Francis de Sales, makes reference to the Greek virtue of *eutrapelia*. He describes it as "joking words, spoken by way of modest and innocent merriment." It's a kind of humor among friends that comes with "unaffected freedom, confidence, and familiarity cleverly expressed."

The saint is quick to add, however, that we must beware of passing from mirthful banter to ridicule, derision, and mockery. Even among friends, and even if unintended, when laughter occurs at the expense of our neighbor's dignity, the virtue becomes a vice.

Read only in print, the pope's responses might seem out of character for one whom even the journalists address as "Your Holiness." But the press corps traveling with him sees him for who he is. Caroline Wyatt, from the BBC, once wrote, "even the sceptics and the critics of the Roman Catholic Church might find this pope hard to resist in person. He is disarming, and has a personality that feels like a force of nature: irrepressible, jocular, open. He was dubbed in US (magazine) the 'People's Pope', and you can see why."

More important than popularity, the papal banter actually serves his pastoral mission. Just as his apostolic journeys offer a "live" encounter with the joy of the gospel, so do his press conferences. Standing in their midst, Pope Francis creates a cordial environment among reporters corralled on a plane. His good-natured humor helps make him "real" to them, thereby reducing the communications distance between them.

By evoking smiles and laughter, Pope Francis acts as a pastor drawing close to his flock – those on the flight and those who will read the media reports. Keeping the purpose of the pope's playfulness in mind, we might take a lesson from how he communicates. As Gisotti suggested to the press, we who are adults could learn from the image at World Youth Day: "Young people when they are happy, share their joy, they don't keep it for themselves."

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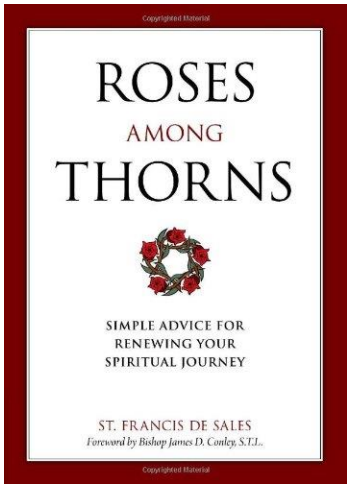
PROFITING FROM OUR FAULTS THIS LENT

(March 11, 2019)

In his message for Lent 2019, Pope Francis describes the sacred season as a "path to Easter" that "demands that we renew our faces and hearts as Christians through repentance, conversion and forgiveness, so as to live fully the abundant grace of the paschal mystery."

Plodding along that path each year makes it look like a never-ending journey. Honest self-reflection identifies the extent of our ever-present faults. Futility frustrates our quest to become better people, let alone the saints we are called to be.

That perception, however, perpetuates a false impression. Saints are not folks with no faults. What makes them holy is their renewable resolve. Some – like ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) – can teach us how we, too, can profit from our faults.



One of only thirty-six "doctors" in history the Catholic Church, this saint offers timeless teaching to aid us in the pursuit of sanctity. He guides us through the frustration of striving to be good without totally succeeding by proposing a three-step process for spiritual renewal during Lent.

It begins with the recognition of the uphill struggle we face in life. In truth, he writes, "we must never be astonished at finding ourselves imperfect … because there is no cure for it!" Human finitude limits the personal resolve even of saints, as he tells Saint Jane de Chantal: "I don't know how I am made. I feel miserable, but I don't trouble myself about it; and sometimes I am even happy in thinking that I am a really good object for the mercy of God."

In that joyous self-disclosure, we find a key to making progress. Admitting our inability to be free from faults is good; despairing about it is not. No one likes failure. But our typical responses – either giving up or trying harder – do not change the fact that earthly perfection eludes us.

Hence, the saint repeatedly counsels calmness along the way of conversion: "When we discover that the lute is out of tune, it isn't necessary to break its strings and throw it out! What we have to do is to lend an attentive ear to discover which is the discordant string, and then tighten or loosen it as required." And when we show "more compassion for (our heart) than passion against it," the potential for personal change "will sink far deeper and penetrate more effectively than fretful, angry, stormy repentance."

Step two entails shifting the balance of power, by focusing not on our own ineptitude but on the eternal power of God. After all, no matter the prevalence of our misdeeds, nothing that we do or fail to do changes who God is. "The foundation of (our) trust," writes de Sales, "should be in Him not in

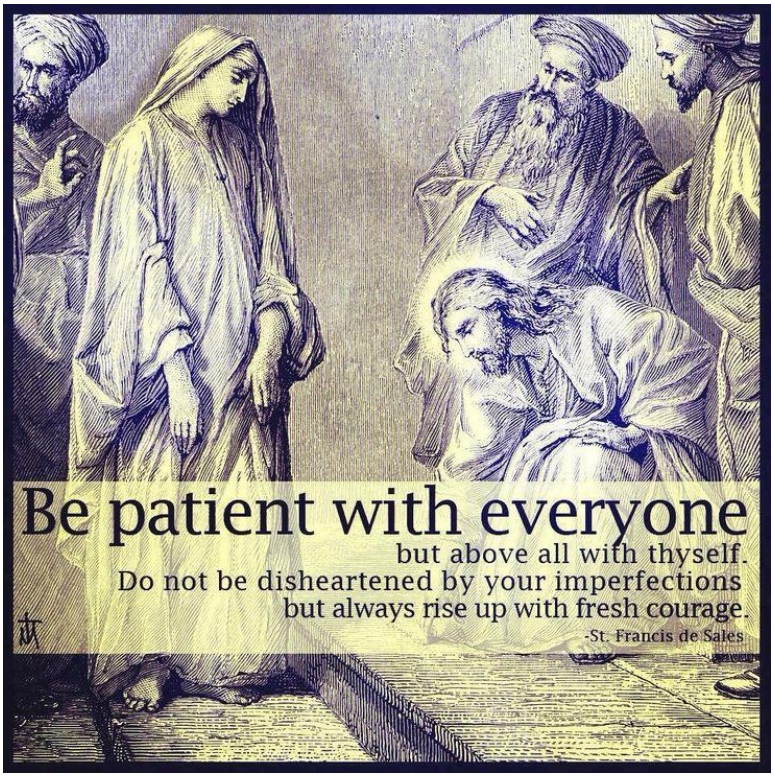
us. All the more so because we change, and He never does; He always remains good and merciful, whether we are weak and imperfect or whether we are strong and perfect."

Entrusting ourselves to this beneficent divine power gives us the best chance to advance along the path to holiness. As one of the saint's spiritual daughters, Sister Mary de Sales Chappuis, would say centuries later, "Each time we offer (Jesus) a fault to be forgiven, we give Him the title of Savior."

Having handed our efforts over to this saving God, all that remains, as the final step, is to begin again … and again and again! For St. Francis de Sales, renewing our resolutions is not a sign of desperation but of persistence. Starting over despite never seeming to arrive at our goal comes not from being thick-headed but from being faithful and hopeful.

This is our lot in life. This is our seasonal quest – to recognize our faults, trust in God's grace, and resolve again to follow along that path to Easter.

In this, the saintly doctor encourages us: "Rest is reserved for heaven … (while) on earth we should always fight as though we are between fear and hope. But we must do so, knowing that hope will always be the stronger, bearing in mind the power of the One who comes to our aid."



Or, as the pope named Francis puts it, "We can thus journey from Easter to Easter towards the fulfillment of the salvation we have already received as a result of Christ's paschal mystery."

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SUMMONING THE NEXT GENERATION OF THE CHURCH

(April 5, 2019)

Having received my first correspondence from the Social Security Administration, I must officially be old! Perhaps, then, I can speak with some insight, if not also wisdom gained from age, about "the next generation."

If there is one, that is – at least in terms of church-goers.

The numbers are staggering. In a diocese I recently visited, the local bishop informed his flock about "a significant decline in Catholic affiliation and participation." Since 2000, parish registrations there have declined 36%, Mass attendance dropped by 60%, and sacraments received were down by about 65%. Add to that a 43% decrease in the number of priests in active ministry, with a projected loss of another 20% by 2025, and the prospects look grim.

That's just one diocese, in one part of the country, where the overall population is also decreasing. But similar numbers drive the story elsewhere, too.

If forty years constitute a generation, these numbers reflect just the first half of our future. Given the trajectory, what do the next twenty years portend? Will there even be a local church when the younger generation comes of age?

Doomsday scenarios contrast sharply with our faith. We believe, as Jesus says, that the Church will remain "rock" solid in terms of its continuing presence in our world (Matt 16:18). Some think that tomorrow's Church will actually grow by becoming smaller; the so-called "Benedict Option" advocates for a faithful remnant "to embrace exile from mainstream culture and construct a resilient counterculture."

But a smaller and stronger Church still needs people in it. Given today's trends, the actuarial forecast demands our attention.

Some will undoubtedly object that growth in the Church is not about numbers, but about faithfulness. True. But, as accountants like to say, "no margin, no mission." Beyond the financial concerns, the Church's mission to proclaim the Good News of salvation will be adversely impacted if its adherents continue to vanish. It *is* about the numbers when we remember these represent souls in need of salvation.

We celebrate that salvation at Mass and through the sacraments. But with fewer young people present in Church on a regular basis, how will the next generation know what's going on there?

Unfortunately, the most recent apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis – *Christus Vivit* – does not directly address the active participation of young people in the liturgical life of the Church. Opening with the affirmation that "Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive," the pope crafts his message "to young people and to the entire people of God" in a way that looms much larger than worship. In his analysis of the text, Fr. Antonio Spadaro notes the recurrence of terminology associated with "living" and with "youth" (exactly 280 times each) and claims that "the pivot around which the entire discourse rotates" is "a life fully lived."

But the exhortation does intend "to remind you [young people] of certain convictions born of our faith, and at the same time to encourage you to grow in holiness and in commitment to your personal vocation" (no. 3). In that case, one might legitimately ask what role the Sunday celebration plays in their conviction, growth, and commitment.

Given the document's length (32,632 words in 299 paragraphs, plus 164 endnotes), a comparable analysis of terminology puts that question into bold relief.

The exhortation refers to the "Eucharist" just five times: as a source of strength (no. 35) and growth (no. 173), through the nourishing presence of Christ (no. 229), whom youth are invited to receive (no. 161) and to adore (no. 299). But mention of the "Mass" is nowhere found in the text; it appears only in the notes (in four titles of homilies cited). And "liturgy" figures only twice in the document, both times referring to areas of youth ministry needing to be developed.

These word counts should not detract from the otherwise praiseworthy aspects of the newest papal exhortation. On the whole, it does provide what Archbishop Chaput calls "a wonderful summons to the church to more vigorously invest in youth and young adults."

But for the sake of our ecclesial future, that effort must eventually lead the next generation back to the pews, where they can uniquely experience the transcendent power and sacramental presence of Christ. After all, as a previous synod noted, the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. Without a summons to Sunday, our investment in young adults will not yield long-term dividends for the Church, locally or universally.

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RE-IMAGING CHURCH AS AN ECCLESIAL NETWORK

(May 10, 2019)

The tragic events in Sri Lanka have raised an interesting question for people of faith everywhere. With Sunday Masses there having been canceled for a second week due to ongoing security concerns, what does it mean to be the Church if the faithful cannot gather in a church?

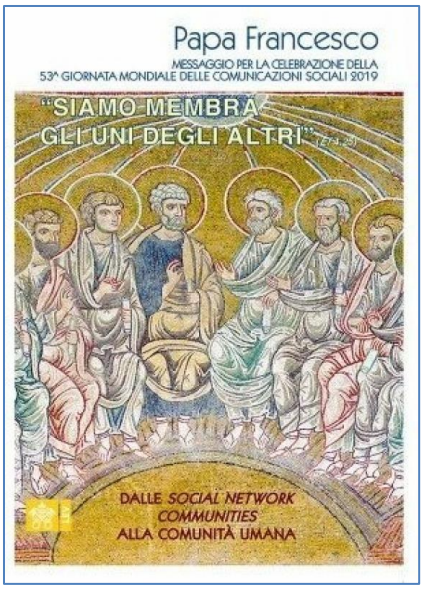
To provide for the faithful, the archbishop, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, celebrates Mass at this residence, which is televised for all to view. In our electronic environment, does this constitute "going" to church? Might we conceive of the Church as a "network" of the ecclesial kind, akin to the social networks so prominent in today's digital world?

(Manish Swarup / AP)

Pope Francis offers a response to the latter question in this year's Message for the World Day of Communications. That papal text explores the theme of moving "From *social network communities* to the human community." Its final sentence claims: "The Church herself is a network woven together by Eucharistic communion, where unity is based not on 'likes', but on the truth, on the 'Amen", by which each one clings to the Body of Christ, and welcomes others."

For the Holy Father, the metaphorical understanding of Church as a network is grounded on the Pauline assertation that "we are members one of another" (Ephesians 4:25). This kind of membership far exceeds the voluntary association characteristic of most organizations. Instead, it speaks to a faith-based unity in diversity, the former centered on Jesus Christ, the latter reflecting the distinct persons who believe in Him.

This notion of community, says Pope Francis, reflects "our being created in the image and likeness of God who is communion and communication-of-Self." Personal faith in a Trinitarian God is, itself, a relationship. As a consequence of this dynamic encounter, "and under the impetus of God's love," solidarity in faith unites believers in an act of welcoming, understanding, and responding to each other in the charity that is Christianity's hallmark.



To speak of the church as an ecclesial "network" expresses this sense of religious community in terms redolent of today's social media. Like the image of a virtual "commons" or online hub (think: Google hangout), this model appreciates the connectedness of a catholic (i.e, universal) Church. Through the global reach of digital technology, it can also serve the Church's universal mission of "making disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19).

But the network model poses serious questions in terms of belonging to a Church. Do people connected online actually encounter one another as fellow believers? That may be difficult in front of a screen at home, but neither does it happen simply through proximity in a pew at church. Are believers joined through the internet truly committed to their church community? Geographical distance potentially lessens the linkage, but so does a lack of intentionality among those present at liturgies in a church.

Church-goers rarely consider it, but what they do each week in worship entails multiple modalities of human action. They see and are seen together. They speak and hear, in words and songs. They relate to and interact with fellow believers. They "actively participate" in the liturgical action by attending to, and intending with, what's going on.

Through the marvels of digital technology, these actions can now happen online, even if to a lesser degree. The physical space may not be shared, but the spiritual space can be.

In fact, the notion that presence can be mediated in absence lies at the heart of every liturgy. Through sacred rituals, the graced presence of Jesus is manifest in sensible ways, not unlike how the risen Lord was made known to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. As theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet explains, "In his absence, his presence prevails as a living memory in and through the Church; the Church mediates this presence through word, sacrament, and ethical action."

At every Mass, God's presence is mediated to us through liturgical modalities. We believe Jesus remains with us in his biblical Word, in the minster who acts "in persona Christi," in the assembly of believers who gather in his name, and in the bread and wine that become His body and blood in the Eucharist.

Digital transmission adds a layer of mediation to the fundamental work of the Church. Far from ideal, it nevertheless provides some real share in our Eucharistic communion with God and fellow believers when being together in-person is rendered impossible. Even online we can cling to the Body of Christ as members of one another.

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PAYING FORWARD THE JOYFUL ANNOUNCEMENT

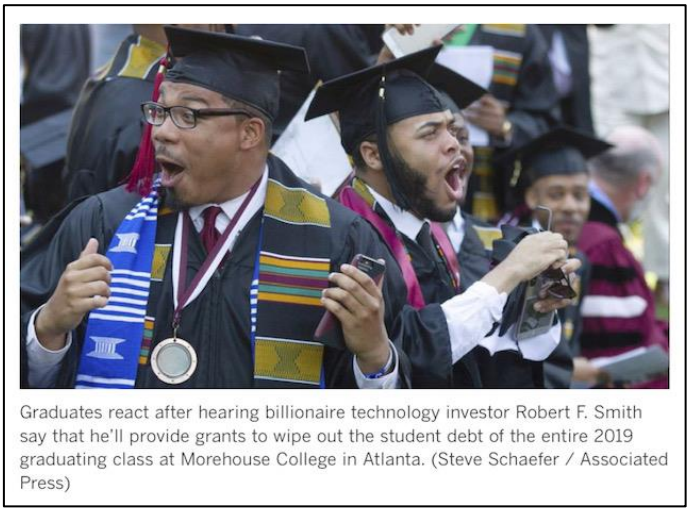
(6/3/19)

For many folks, in and out of school, these days constitute a season of celebration. Colleges and universities, high schools and grade schools, even preschool programs all formalize their students' transition with some sort of pomp and circumstance.

Most graduation ceremonies include a guest speaker invited to share some wit and wisdom in giving advice to those advancing to the next stage of their lives. Usually, the speeches are forgotten by the time the parties commence.

But not for the class of 2019 at Morehouse College. Their speaker, billionaire technology investor Robert F. Smith, departed from his prepared remarks to announce that his family would make a financial grant to pay off all the student loans of his new classmates.

Estimated afterward to be a gift worth $40 million, Smith's philanthropic promise drew a variety of reactions: stunned amazement from most (especially parents), shock and awe from some (like the administrators on stage), and whoops of joy from all the graduates. "Priceless" indeed!


Graduates react after hearing billionaire technology investor Robert F. Smith say that he'll provide grants to wipe out the student debt of the entire 2019 graduating class at Morehouse College in Atlanta. (Steve Schaefer / Associated Press)

Then came the challenge, made to alumni old and new. Smith exhorted them to pay it forward, so that others might benefit from the opportunity for a new life now generously afforded to them.

Unlike most graduation speeches, that one will certainly be remembered by the Morehouse College class of 2019, who can now embark on their careers debt-free. We, too, hear a beneficent speech at this time of year. Though less tangible, the gift and challenge that Jesus offers in this season between Ascension and Pentecost is even more life-changing.

For forty days, we have celebrated the power of God to overcome death in the Resurrection of Jesus. With his Ascension to the Father's right hand, we celebrate the promise of Jesus to lift up humanity to eternal heights. And in his promise that the Holy Spirit would come at Pentecost, we celebrate the never-ending presence of God in our world and in our lives.

These gifts are announced to, and conferred upon, all believers at Baptism. They continue to be shared through the grace of the Sacraments we celebrate in the Church. Considering the divine beneficence, one might wonder why our reactions don't resemble, match, or exceed those at the Morehouse commencement ceremony.

Are we amazed at the stunning course of events in salvation history, which we recall each year in this liturgical season? Are we in awe at the generosity of God's loving kindness toward us, evident in the merciful grace always available to us despite our many sins? Are we actually filled with the joy of our faith, which we, too, can pay forward through the happiness of our demeanor, the kindness of our words, and the generosity of our deeds?

The graduation speech by Mr. Smith, his gift to the graduates, and his challenge to his fellow alumni, all made real the sense of community at Morehouse College. The community of the Church calls us, even more so, to be "members one of another" (Eph 4:25), as Pope Francis reminds us in this year's message for World Communications Day.

Forty million-dollar donations may not be in the offing, though they would certainly be helpful! But each of us, clergy and lay faithful alike, have at our disposal a communications tool that costs nothing to use – the smile in our hearts and on our faces that tells the world of our joy at having been redeemed by God.

Each week at Mass, we profess faith in the Father who created us, in the Son whose Death and Resurrection and Ascension saves us, and in the Holy Spirit who comes upon us at Pentecost and remains present with us in and through the Church.

For Christians, even more than college students, the Good News announced and affirmed in these events out to evoke comparable reactions of wonder, awe, and joy. When we speak and hear these words with real faith, then our hope comes alive. When we realize the gift we have been given by God, then we will be inspired to take up the challenge of discipleship.

Responding to this gift and this challenge, with vibrant faith and engaging hope, we also have an opportunity to lead new lives. For what we celebrate in this sacred season is not a graduation, but our salvation.

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HOW TO DRINK LIKE A SAINT

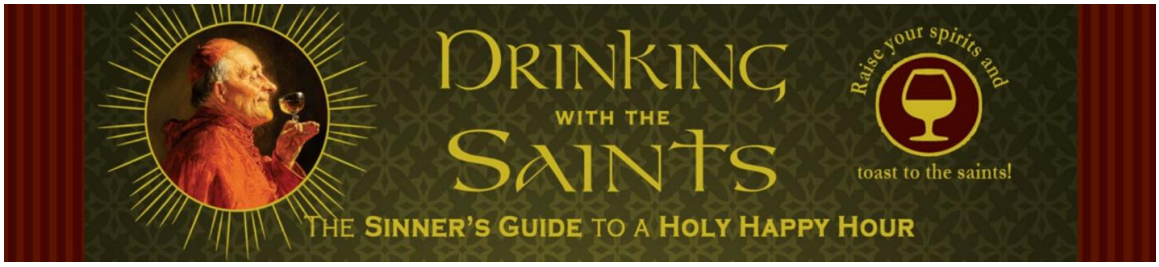
(7/3/19)

With our celebration of Independence Day, summertime is in full swing. With daylight "savings" and long weekends and vacation getaways, our life takes on a more leisurely pace.

Along the way, we find seasonal opportunities to share adult beverages. Neighborly cookouts call for spritzy cocktails. Theatre festivals feature the wines of the times. At ballparks, "a dog 'n a beer" remain the stale on every menu. In summertime, "happy hour" tends to last much longer than sixty minutes.

Leisure and liquor seem to go hand-in-hand, the former as an opportunity for relaxation, the latter as a means to it. Even more, they can also put us on a path to something sacred.

So says Dr. Michael Foley, who shows the way there in *Drinking with the Saints: The Sinner's Guide to a Holy Happy Hour* (Regnery History, 2015).



In this still popular book, Foley connects specific cocktails to the feast days of the liturgical calendar. For each saint's day, he mixes a bit of biography along with a recipe for just the right beverage to celebrate that holy life.

More broadly, Foley's research offers interesting historical tales and convincing theological arguments that make for a spirited defense of drink. His apologia for alcohol is grounded on the power of joy, an altogether human emotion cultivated also by religious faith.

As to the sacred character of summer spirits, he reminds us that wine was the result of Jesus's first miracle (during the wedding feast at Cana) and it remains today the sacramental matter of the Eucharist. He references ritual prayers for the blessing of beer and wine that speak of the former as a product of God's kindness and the latter as a way to cheer human hearts.

Historically, Foley notes how the Church has long been associated with the production of alcohol, thereby cultivating sacred joy in profane spirits. Brewing beer was perfected in Trappist monasteries. A Benedictine (Dom Pérignon) invented the method for making champagne, and the Carthusians created a magical liqueur at Chartreuse. Whiskey started with Irish monks (who sought a cure for "paralysis of the tongue"!), while fine California wines began when St. Junipero Serra brought grapes to that missionary region.

More than a paean to getting plastered, Foley's work links social custom and virtuous intention by offering five insights on how to drink like saints. He insists on drinking with moderation, in a temperance that avoids excess in any and all things. He exhorts us to drink with gratitude, recognizing the benefits we enjoy. He counsels us to drink with memory (i.e., a reason) rather than simply to forget. To this he adds drinking with merriment that purposefully engages others. Finally, he encourages us to drink with rituals, where joy coincides with sociability in the festive celebration of events, of people, and of life.

It's good advice to be sure, offering practical wisdom to a perennial practice.

Still, as our Lord teaches, real holiness concerns more what comes out of our hearts than what we take in with our lips. The true taste of a saintly life comes not from the spirits we imbibe but from the Spirit we heed in our relationship with God.

One simple yet effective way to cultivate this relationship in every season lies in the practice of spiritual aspirations. For St. Francis de Sales, these are "short, ardent movements of your heart" or other prayerful good thoughts made throughout the day as a way to habituate us to being in a divine relationship, even while we are rightly busy about worldly things.

Using an image appropriate to our topic, the Savoyard saint explains that "there is no difficulty in this exercise (of making aspirations), as it may be interspersed among all our tasks and duties without any inconvenience, since in this spiritual retirement or amid these interior aspirations we only relax quietly and briefly. This does not hinder but rather assists us greatly in what we do. The pilgrim who takes a little wine to restore his heart and refresh his mouth stops for a while but does not interrupt his journey by doing so. On the contrary, he gains new strength to finish it more quickly and easily since he rests only in order to proceed the better."

This summer, in a favorite pub or at a family picnic, you can make those sips more sacred by lifting up a holy thought each time you raise a glass. *Cheers!*

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EMPTY PEWS AND THE FUTURE OF CATHOLIC PARISHES

(8/5/19)

The numbers tell a previously unthinkable tale.

A Gallup poll notes that, amid a sharp downturn in religious affiliation, "the decline in church membership has been greater among Catholics. Twenty years ago, 76% of Catholics belonged to a church; now, 63% do."

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) reports that the Catholic Church now operates close to 1,500 fewer parishes nationally than it did in 1971. That news hits even closer to home when one realizes that the largest reduction of parishes has taken place in Pennsylvania (down 532 since 1971).

For folks in this archdiocese, that's a tough pill to swallow. After all, Philadelphia is the home to two saints (John Neumann and Katherine Drexel). The Catholic parochial school system began here. And old-timers remember when you identified your home neighborhood by naming the local parish – even if you weren't a Catholic!

Those days are gone. Today's exigencies necessitate the merger of multiple parishes or the closing of church buildings and their relegation to non-religious uses.

Locals might take some consolation in the fact that elsewhere in the country Catholic churches are opening. According to CARA, "The pattern in parish losses and gains follows economic and social mobility changes in the country more generally." Still, the empty pews on Sundays make for a sad sight and portend a dismal future for the Church.

This is not a recent phenomenon. As the research shows, the numbers have been dwindling for decades.

It should come as no surprise that the ongoing decline in the birthrate has led to fewer Baptisms, which then leads to fewer school enrollments, fewer sacraments administered (Confirmations and First Communions and Marriages), fewer clergy ordained, and less of everything in terms of participating in and supporting the life of a parish.

What may be more surprising is the seeming exodus of an entire generation. Bishop Robert Barron recently painted a stark picture to his brother bishops when he said that "50% of Catholics 30 years old and younger have left the church" and "one out of six millennials in the U.S. is now a former Catholic."

No intervening event accounts for this downturn in religious affiliation. The empty pews today show not so much an intentional flight as a passive, drifting away from the faith.

For many, the routine of going to Church seems simply no longer to be worth it. Perhaps the fact that it has been merely a routine, whether for clergy or congregants, explains the downward trend in affiliation.

Other research, conducted by the Catholic Leadership Institute, suggests what contributes to a positive experience of parish life. Data drawn from more than six hundred parishes in twenty-eight (arch)dioceses across North America indicate consistent factors determining whether the lay faithful would recommend their parish to others. The top drivers include people's view of their pastor, their experience of Sunday worship (especially the preaching), their felt sense of the parish as a welcoming and accepting community, and their being helped to recognize how God is at work in their life.

Meeting those needs remains a tall order. It may require changing the way things have always been done, especially to attract the millennials.

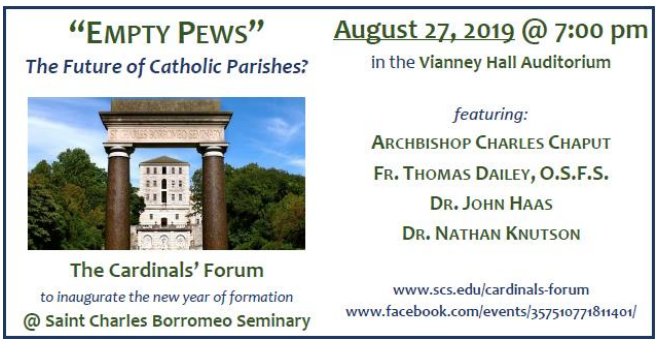
Parishes tend to operate on a geographical model, with identifiable boundaries and physical locations that once served as rallying points in cities, towns, and neighborhoods. But in social settings no longer delineated by cultural background or circumscribed by means of transportation, that model no longer works as a paradigm of parish membership, especially for the younger, more mobile generation.

Future parishioners may have to travel farther for Mass. Or, perhaps Mass will one day be celebrated "live" in a centralized location and simultaneously telecast to other churches where the local community can participate.

Given the decreasing numbers of clergy and congregants, cutbacks are coming in terms of educational opportunities and social services. Perhaps future parishes will purposefully drop all activities except worship, thereby concentrating resources (material, financial, and human) on the liturgical and sacramental economy of the church.

If we truly want Catholics to "come home," parishes need to provide a vibrant and engaging experience worth coming to, an experience of God and divine grace that makes going to Church the unique encounter that it can and should be.

Then, hopefully, the declining numbers will turn around – when people of all ages realize that what we really seek, what we truly need, what we cannot find or obtain anywhere else is offered to us each time we gather in the pews to worship the Lord.



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USE YOUR IMAGINATION TO "LIFT HIGH THE CROSS"
(9/13/19)

We pass by it on buildings and roadways. We speak of it in Church and bless ourselves with the sign of it. Some may wear it for personal fashion or religious profession. Others will hang it conspicuously in classrooms or homes.

The "it" is ubiquitous – a CROSS.

But has this symbol become so commonplace that we no longer see it for what it really is?

Whether as an architectural apex or a roadside memorial, the cross stands as a primal image and focal symbol of the Christian faith. Given the visual culture in which we live, it may now have even greater potential to transform the world. Actualizing that potential requires a reconsideration of the transformative power latent in this universal image.

Art has long depicted the sacred. Images of the faith abound in paintings, sculptures, icons, and stained-glass windows, not to mention architecture, literature, music, and other media. But the real power of religious imagery extends beyond the material quality of the construct to encompass, express, and engage a spiritual dimension at work in the one who truly "sees" the images for what they are.

That spiritual character resides in the power of imagery to touch people. "Images are not inanimate signifiers," says David Morgan, a professor of religious studies at Duke University. They are "active agents that shape and structure the experience of saints, self, and the divine."

In this sense, a sacred image is not something just to look at. It's meant to be seen. The difference calls forth a uniquely human power of perception.

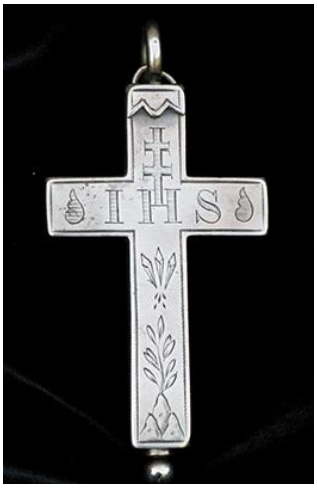
When we truly "see" a sacred image, we not only look at it, we are acted upon by it. We might say that the image looks back at us, does something to us, and challenges us to be something more. Really seeing it invites us to become what we perceive, to participate in what is depicted to us, even to emulate what the image represents.

In this sense, the cross stands as the Christian image par excellence. By means of it, we not only remember what happened when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on it. We also encounter who we are and envision who we are called to be.

In conceptual terms, the cross serves as a "primal image" by expressing in a non-discursive manner the mystery that gives meaning to our lives. As a "focal symbol," it defines our identity as followers of Christ and centers our worship on the God whose own beloved Son died for our salvation.

Wendy Wright, a professor of spirituality at Creighton University, explains those concepts in relation to the distinctive human process whereby we "image, sort, organize and see patterns and meanings every moment of our lives." In the act of contemplative gazing, the imagination can excite our emotions, inform our intellects, and vivify our desires. This, says Wright, is how sacred images "tease the viewer … into longing for a world that is differently constructed from the one in which he or she lives."

This uniquely human ability to perceive a new world through the imagination makes of the cross something more than merely a familiar shape, more than just a reminder of an historical event. To see a cross with eyes of faith is to gain insight into that divine love for human beings that transcends the trials and tribulations of this world.



Therein lies the transformative power of the cross as sacred image. Through it, we remember the past of what happened on it and the person who submitted to it for our sakes. We embrace the present ways in which we, too, can bear it, in solidarity with all who suffer in this life. We long for the future Resurrection to which it points and for which it paved the way.

We "lift high the cross," materially and imaginatively, to be the standard by which we live out the Paschal mystery in our own lives. That mystery is one of redemptive suffering. The cross points to it and engages people in it. The believer embraces it by Baptism and strives to take it up daily.

Still today, whether we pass by it, speak about it, wear it, or display it, the cross discloses the fundamental meaning and message of Christian faith. It remains a sign and symbol of what Wright describes as "the basic fabric of a merciful universe in which pain (is) transfigured into joy."

To share the joy of that divine love is why we forever "exalt" the cross.

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DON'T LIVE IN A MONASTERY? THAT'S OK, THIS GRACE IS FOR YOU (10/1/19)

They've been around since 1610, with roots in America dating back to 1799. Today, nine monasteries of the Visitation of Holy Mary remain in the USA, including one in this archdiocese.

Nestled near the vehicular madness on City Avenue, on land adjoining the bustling campus of St. Joseph's University, the Philadelphia monastery carries on the centuries-old tradition of contemplative prayer. From the midst of their silent lives comes breaking news of benefit even to those outside the monastery's walls.

The Vatican's Apostolic Penitentiary has approved the request for Visitation monasteries around the world to celebrate a "jubilee year" beginning this October 16, the feast day of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, in honor of the centenary of her canonization.

Why should a sacred celebration accorded to contemplative nuns matter to the rest of us? Because it can help us understand the project of holiness, advance the popularity of devotion, and realize the power of grace.

The prayerful presence of the Visitation Sisters embodies a distinctive spirituality bequeathed to them by their saintly founders, Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal. Although it is modeled in the monastery, the Salesian approach to holiness is ultimately intended for, and ideally suited to, people living "in the world."

In his classic *Introduction to the Devout Life*, de Sales reckons holiness to be the practice of charity "carefully, frequently, and promptly" in and through the particular state-in-life to which God calls us, whatever that may be. He explains how everyone can pray, practice virtue, and avoid vice in the very midst of this world's responsibilities.

Building on this enculturated view of sanctity, Francis and Jane initiated an innovative approach to religious life. Their originally non-cloistered order would accept widows and other women who were not able to manage the austere life of mortification demanded in other monasteries.

Instead, the Visitation path to perfection focuses on an ordinarily life lived extraordinarily well through the practice of the "little virtues" and a "daily mutual forbearance" that teaches the Sisters "to see God's will in every circumstance of life." From the living laboratory of the monastery comes the formula for anyone to live today well.

That simple approach to holiness would later be popularized through devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In the monastery of Paray-le-Monial, St. Margaret Mary (1647-1690) embraced the Salesian plan of holiness, allowing herself to be placed "in the school of Him whose heart held nothing dearer than meekness, humility and charity." Through a series of apparitions, the Lord Jesus singled out

His heart to her as a focus for contemplation of God's love for all humanity and of reparation for the world's indifferent response to that love.

Visitation monasteries subsequently fostered devotion to the Sacred Heart, eventually leading to the designation of a universal feast in 1856. Since then, holy hours on first Fridays, novenas, guards of honor, and enthronement of the Sacred Heart in homes remain among the most practiced devotions in the Church.

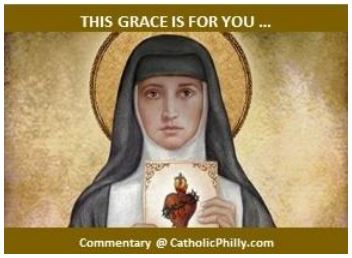
The centenary celebration now beginning extends the graces associated with this tradition. In keeping with the jubilee year, a plenary indulgence is granted to all who enter a Visitation monastery chapel on certain dates and under the usual conditions.

Talk of indulgences may seem antiquated, conjuring the financing of crusades and building projects in a "pay to play" scheme for salvation. But the reformed practice really seeks to inspire fervor in all those who strive to love God and neighbor.

Simply stated, an indulgence affords the penitent person an opportunity to counteract the injurious and residual effects of sin. The tradition of granting them builds on the inexhaustible merits of Christ's own work of salvation, which He bestowed upon the apostles in the power of "binding and loosing" sins (Matt 16:19; 18:18). Those merits, shared in the communion of saints, constitute the "treasury of the Church."

From that treasury, sinners in every age can receive spiritual aid in their ongoing purification and continual conversion. The benefit accrues to those who detach themselves from affection for any sin, make a valid sacramental Confession, worthily receive Holy Communion, and pray for the intentions of the pope – all done in conjunction with some designated spiritual work

During the Visitation's jubilee year, that spiritual work entails visiting a monastery chapel on the first Friday of any month, on the feast days of St. Margaret Mary (October 16), St. Francis de Sales (January 24), or St. Jane de Chantal (August 12), or on the solemnities of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (May 31) or of the Sacred Heart (June 19).



Visitation monasteries are places of quiet prayer, but this year a grand celebration calls us all to rejoice with them.

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HUMILITY HELPS US SEE THE SACRED IN THE SUBLIME
(11/8/19)

Every November, the splendor of life at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary comes into spectacular focus. While the beautiful Fall foliage appears, the unique special effects happen during four days of celebration with which the month begins.

The first three days are given over to the Forty Hours devotion, so designated for the "period of continuous prayer made before the Blessed Sacrament in solemn exposition." (At the seminary, it's more like fifty-five hours in real time!) The fourth bishop of Philadelphia, St. John Neumann, introduced this tradition in 1853, and it seems to have been celebrated at Overbrook ever since.

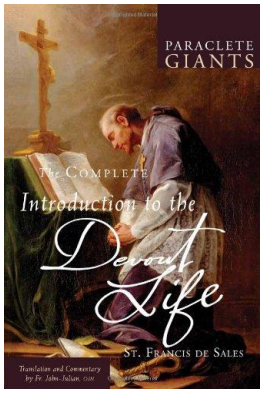
The devotion begins on All Saints Day, when the glories of heaven's population are feted liturgically, including the public display of more than 140 relics. The devotion continues through All Souls Day, the "Dia de los muertos" which featured a display of name and photos of deceased loved ones to be remembered. The devotion closes on the third evening with an outdoor candle-lit procession and solemn Benediction.

On the fourth day, the archbishop joins the seminary community to celebrate its patron saint. During Mass, he formally admits a new group of men to "candidacy," meaning they make a public protestation of their intention to exercise one day the sacred order of priest. His homily this year focused on the cultivation of "humilitas" – the virtue singularly highlighted on the seminary's coat of arms.

Humility links everyone – saints and seminarians alike – in the truth that we are not perfect. Humility reminds us of who we are before God: sinners in need of divine mercy. Deriving from the Latin word for earth ("humus"), humility keeps us grounded and thereby allows us to see and treat others on the same footing. To cite a claim attributed to St. Augustine: "There is no saint without a past, no sinner without a future."

Unlike the virtues associated with heroic deeds, the "little" virtue of humility can fit into everyone's life. Opportunities to practice it abound each day. Others often see to it that we know just how imperfect we are!

Beyond the seminary campus, humility can yield benefits for anyone who seeks to live each day well. Long before the rise of positive psychology, St. Francis de Sales wrote about two of them in his *Introduction to the Devout Life:* gratitude and courage.



"A lively consideration of graces received," he notes, "makes us humble because knowledge of them begets gratitude for them." In addition, growth in humility also leads to a more courageous bearing with all that happens to us, and even gives us a more daring approach to daily living. "The proud man who trusts in himself has good reason not to attempt anything. The humble man is all the more courageous because he recognizes his own impotence. The more wretched he esteems himself the more daring he becomes because he places his whole trust in God who rejoices to display his power in our weakness and raise up his mercy in our misery."

That uplifting power is displayed with great fanfare during the seminary's November celebrations. Yet the real spiritual force happens when we see the sacred in the sublime.

A Forty Hours devotion may be replete with glowing candles, hymnic chants, and all the smells and bells we rightly associate with solemn worship. But what we worship – the real presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament – comes to us in the material form of bread and wine, elements of the earth in which the Lord humbles himself most profoundly for our sakes. As de Sales describes it, "You cannot consider our Savior in an action more full of love or more tender than this. In [the Eucharist] he abases himself … and changes himself into food, so that he may penetrate our souls and unite himself most intimately to the heart and body of the faithful."

In the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, that divine humility is displayed that we might come to adore Him, as all the saints now do unceasingly in heaven. In the life of St. Charles Borromeo, that humility is exemplified in the way that this prelate, not-so-learned by academic standards, was nevertheless able to preach and teach with such effectiveness that he ranks among the heroic figures of the Church's reformation.

As seminary days return to their routine, and all of us carry on with ours, a life of "humilitas" remains not only an institutional axiom but a personal aim – for everyone who seeks to be a saint.

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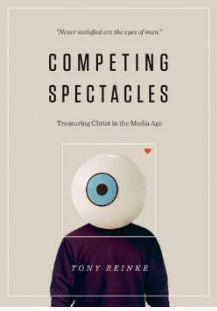
SEEING THE REAL SPECTACLE AT CHRISTMAS
(12/10/19)

By now folks likely have all their Christmas decorations up. Trees have been trimmed with shiny garland and memorable ornaments. Wreathes adorn the doors and colored lights glow brightly outdoors. Perhaps somewhere in the house is a Nativity scene, still awaiting placement of the baby Jesus on December 25.

Christmas is undoubtedly the most "spectacular" holiday of the year. That claim rings true in a theological sense when we consider the cosmic-altering event being commemorated. As St. John Paul II boldly pronounced in the first line of his first encyclical, "The Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the centre of the universe and of history."

But the spectacular quality of Christmas may be even more obvious, to more people, in terms of social communications. Spectacles have always been around, but in our age of new media, where image seems to be everything, this seasonal holiday shines with a special appeal.



In "Competing Spectacles: Treasuring Christ in the Media Age" (Crossway, 2019), Tony Reinke explains the power of any spectacle to capture our attention, to hold us together in a collective gaze, and to call forth form us a lived response. Realizing that we are bombarded with an incessant stream of images about politics or sports or commerce, we can readily concur with his claim that "the human heart bends toward what the eye sees." Indeed, marketing professionals count on the fact that visual images "get inside us, shape us, and form our lives."

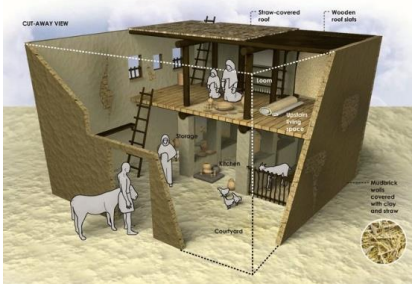
But the reason spectacles affect us so profoundly lies not so much in the creative ingenuity with which they are produced, nor in the technological prowess with which they are disseminated. Rather, as Reinke notes, "The true power of spectacles is in *what we think they offer us* … (in) the power of the image to make demands on us (that) originates in the attention that we devote to it."

Images of Christmas display that power. They offer us light and joy, good cheer and genuine merriment. They inspire happiness and hope. They bring warmth to a wintry season.

But what makes us so devoted to the spectacle of Christmas is not the entertainment given to our eyes. "The Great Christmas Light Fight" may make for holiday television, but its premise renders it nothing more than a banal attempt to capitalize on the human penchant for competition and desire for prizes – both signs of an inherent greed that runs counter to the true spirit of the season.

Instead, the Christmas spectacles we cherish offer enchantment to our imagination. Jolly old Saint Nick, Rudolf with his red nose, the friends round Charlie Brown on stage, and George Bailey's guardian angel all make for "a wonderful life" this time of year by stirring within us the sense of kindness, illumination, appreciation, and insight that we value with more than seasonal regard.

For Christians, at least, no image appears greater these days than the Nativity scene. While some scholars have raised interesting questions about its historical details, the Franciscan tradition has bequeathed to us a way to bring that biblical scene to life in an adorable and admirable way.



In his recent apostolic letter on the meaning and importance of this sign of the times, Pope Francis rightly notes how the Christmas crèche helps us to imagine what took place on that starry night in Bethlehem. In doing so, he says, "it touches our hearts and makes us enter into salvation history as contemporaries of an event that is living and real in a broad gamut of historical and cultural contexts."

In other words, the Nativity scene functions as a most worthwhile spectacle. Giving it a place of prominence among the many household decorations is a vivid way to pass on the faith to families and visitors alike.

As the pope puts it, "Beginning in childhood, and at every stage of our lives, it teaches us to contemplate Jesus, to experience God's love for us, to feel and believe that God is with us and that we are with him, his children, brothers and sisters all, thanks to that Child who is the Son of God and the Son of the Virgin Mary. And to realize that in that knowledge we find true happiness."

And finding true happiness, in the God-given joy that can extend throughout the year, is the best spectacle of all.

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