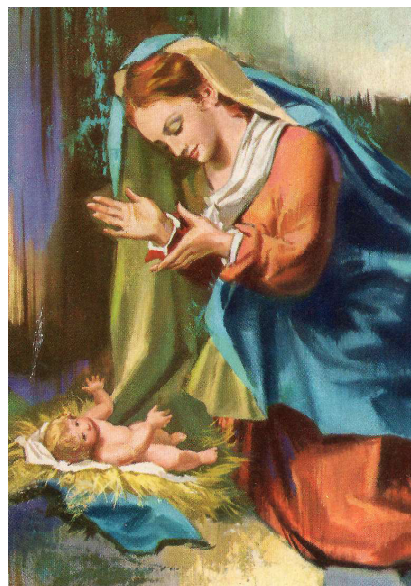


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*May all your days
of all the years
that God has still in store
be filled with every joy
and grace
to bless you more and more.*

*May hope of heart
and peace of mind
beside you ever stay,
and that's the golden wish
we have for you
this Christmas day*

*From all of us at the Shrine of
Don Bosco's Madonna, Mumbai*

From The Editor's Desk

RIGHT FROM THE HEART

In the 1980s as I was finishing my theology. It was then that I read an article about the then famous, Father Charles Davis. He was a famous theology professor in the early sixties. However, in December 1966 he announced that he was leaving the Catholic Church. In the last edition of the famous magazine he edited *The Clergy Review*, he wrote a humble moving piece explaining why he left. Another writer summed up what he wrote in this way: 'After Vatican II, I was enthusiastic about the prospects there were for Church renewal, for updating and changing structures. I would offer to packed audiences the wonderful new theology of Vatican II. [...] But gradually it dawned on me that all those faces turned up towards me were not seeking a new theology; they were seeking God. They were obviously hungry for God. Then I would look into myself and realize, with a sinking heart, that I could not offer them God; I barely had him myself'

What he was saying was that if we lack a pastoral experience of God, then nobody will take our God-talk which was our talk about theology and updating seriously

But what I would like to share with you are some very deep, warm and influential memories I have of Christmas. If the world doesn't take my God-talk seriously, it is my fault not his. When I was young, God shared himself very generously with me at Christmas. Any absence of God in my heart is due to my lack of attention to him.

Every year when I was a child we had a Christmas crib at home. We made a cave out of a wooden box covered it with black paper crumpled to look like rocks. The roof and sides were covered with imitation frost and a small red bulb was fixed on the back wall of the cave. Inside were Mary and Joseph with the shepherds, the wise men and a cow. I would quietly sit there on the floor looking in wonder at it after everyone had gone to sleep. I knew, of course, I was looking at something of religious significance. It was a scene inextricably connected with the warmest of human events.

I have never doubted the reality of Christ becoming a human person and entering my life. He entered my Christmases in a very real way, suited to a child. He was the essential feature of a happy Christmas.

However, as I grew older, I realised Christ became a human person in an even more complete and thorough way. He didn't come just to make me happy at Christmas! He became a man and experienced a selection of all the experiences we have. In his human experiences, recorded in the Gospels, we can experience God and fill the void in our hearts.

We can experience him as alive and active and acting because he is alive and acting. He is in each person we meet. He told us he would be. He is 'built into' God's very plan for the developing emerging world in which we live. There are many places we can choose as starting points to meet him. For me, I think, that place is the Christmas crib.

Where is *your* chosen meeting place with God?

Fr. Ian Doulton sdb

ENGAGEMENT: A TIME OF WONDER AND DISCOVERY

by Giampaolo Dianin

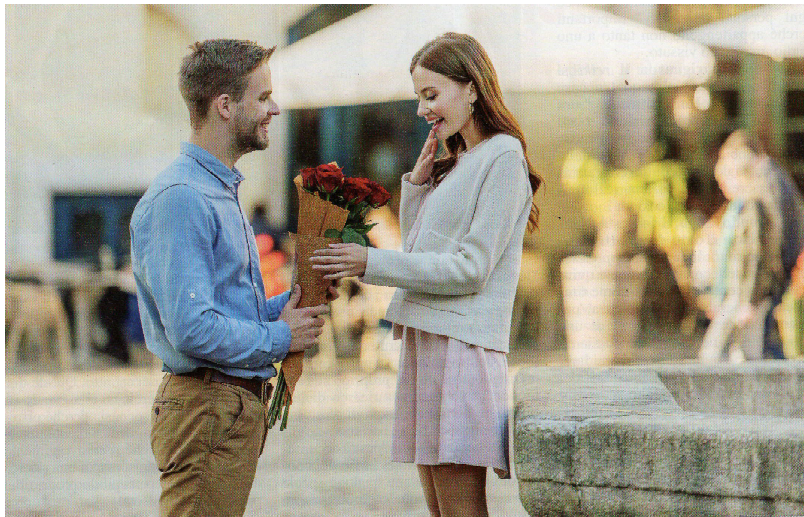
Engagement is much more than being in love and comes before the decision to get married, which does not have to be a foregone conclusion. Let's try to identify the stages in every love story.

I imagine engagement as good soil, ploughed, ready for sowing, so full of promise and fruit. It will be a time of great fecundity because this will give birth to a couple and perhaps marriage and children. A time of wonder, but also searching, all nourished by the sun of divine grace. I imagine that young engaged couples can also be attractive towards the Christian community with the joy they experience and they live.

Pope Francis writes: "Those couples are 'a valuable resource because as they sincerely commit themselves to grow in love and self-giving, they can help renew

the fabric of the whole ecclesial body. Their special form of friendship can prove contagious and foster the growth of friendship in the Christian community of which they are a part" (AL 207). All this is possible if the Christian community does not consider the experience they are living as a simple framework for their being young, but knows how to welcome it, value it and at the same time support and endorse it by making its productive resources available to the engaged couples.

Engagement is, first and foremost, a time of wonder. Young people who live this experience



seem transfigured and can give the best of themselves. They come out of the torpor of a life where they were perhaps served and revered as children to become capable of new creativity. Feeling loved is an experience of liberation that brings out the best in oneself; we can say that love allows a person to know themselves differently. It is a school of humanisation.

Amazement is also the gateway to faith. The challenge of a Christian community, and those who are called to accompany engaged couples, is to speak of God not as an external and extraneous reality to this experience but as the source and very reason for their love. If two people love each other, God first loves them because God created them for love.

We have been created in the image of a God who is love and communion. "Love is from God," writes the Apostle John, "whoever loves is begotten of God and knows God. Whoever does not love has not known God, because God is love" (1 Jn 4:78). Love is a seed that has been given to us, and it depends on our soil and our ability to cultivate it. Love, as a wonder for the other and as a longing for communion with him, can lead the two engaged partners to understand one another longing for communion and be amazed before the One who created them to love.

Lewis writes: "One thing I owe to marriage. Never again will I believe that religion is a product of our unconscious and unsatisfied appetites and a substitute for sex. The few years my wife and I have been together have been a veritable banquet of love; love in all its modulations: solemn and

festive, romantic and realistic, sometimes as loud as a thunderstorm, sometimes as quiet and cosy as slippers. Not a corner of the heart or body was left unsatisfied. If God were a substitute for love, we should have lost all interest in Him. Why waste time on surrogates when you have the original? However, we both knew that we wanted something different beyond the other (C. Lewis, *Diary of Grief*, Adelphi, Milan 1990, pp. 13-14).

Engagement is a time of getting to know each other. Meeting the other person is a real revolution because the relationship is profoundly involving: not only do I get to know the other person, but I get to know new aspects of myself. I realise that I have so much potential that the love of a partner brings to light: I become sweet, enterprising, likeable, capable of profound conversations. However, I realise that I also have dark sides, made of jealousy, intolerance, impatience. In front of the man she loves, the woman reinterprets her relationship with her father, and in front of the woman, the man reinterprets his relationship with his mother.

This knowledge is also a time of truth: the fiancés begin to drop their masks, the ones they initially wore to seduce and show the best of themselves. The more trust grows in the other and the relationship, the more they can drop these masks without fear because they know that the other loves them and can also see their dark sides.

In Christian terms, we can say that engaged couples live a kind of incarnation because they enter into the history of the other, take

on his or her life and at the same time reveal themselves to the other. One enters on tiptoe into the life of the other, not as a spectator, but with the readiness to know and let oneself be known. It is an exodus experience: I leave to enter your world, and I let you enter mine. It is an experience of solidarity: it is not enough to understand; it is necessary to welcome the other person for what he or she is, in his or her uniqueness, because one does not marry the

things one likes about the other but the whole person. God loves humanity made up of saints, sinners, grumblers, good and bad, faithful and traitors; the other has all these faces.

Lewis further writes: "To see to some extent like God. His love and His knowledge are not distinct from each other, nor are they distinct from Him. We might almost say that He sees because He loves, and therefore loves though He sees" (p. 81). □

DON'T SHOUT

An Indian sage once asked his disciples the following question: "Why do people shout when they are angry?"

"They shout because they lose their temper," replied one of them.

"But why shout if the person is close by?" the thinker said again.

"We shout because we want the other person to hear us," replied another disciple.

The teacher asked again: "Why then, does he not speak softly?"

Various other answers were given, but none convinced the sage.

Then he exclaimed: "Do you know why one shouts at another person when one is angry? When two people are angry, their hearts are far apart. To cover this distance, they have to shout in order to be heard. The angrier they are, the louder they will have to shout to hear each other. On the other hand, what happens when two people are in love? They do not shout; they speak softly. And why? Because their hearts are very close. The distance between them is small. Sometimes their hearts are so close that they do not even speak; they whisper.

Furthermore, when love is more intense, it is unnecessary even to whisper, they just look at each other. Their hearts understand each other. That is what happens when two people who love each other get close!

"Finally," the sage concluded: "When you argue, do not let your hearts drift apart, do not say words that will put them further apart, because a day will come when the distance will be so great that they may never find their way back." □



THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND THE HEART OF MAN

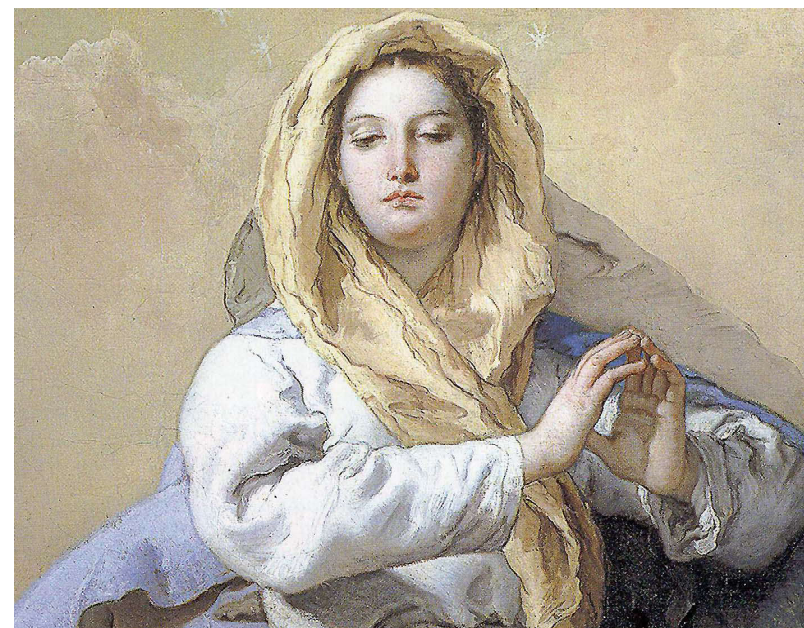
By Chino Biscontin

"On 8 December 1854, with the bull "Ineffabilis Deus," Pope Pius IX declared that the Virgin Mary was preserved free from original sin from the first moment of her conception."

What is it about when, in faith, we speak of Mary's "Immaculate Conception"? We want to affirm that Mary did not inherit the consequences of original sin, as we all do. Not so much the external consequences, such as suffering (the Gospels speak of a sword that pierced her soul, an apparent reference to the tragic death of her Son on the cross), but rather the inner con-

sequences, and in particular those that affect her personal relationship with God.

"In her relationship with God, Mary did not suffer those "distortions" that affect us all. Her relationship with God was limpid, trusting, without any shadow. All this was due to God's own initiative: it was He who "conceived" in His plan of love, a creature, Mary, which



*"The Immaculate Conception" by G.B. Tiepolo (1767)
oil on canvas detail at Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid - Spain*

was open to communion with Him. This is because God, the Father, wanted to raise up his Son as our Saviour, a man in our midst. However, this supreme gift of the Father, Jesus, had to have on this earth someone who would welcome him and generate him maternally with total openness: Mary, the Immaculate!"

This aspect of Catholic doctrine may be perceived as of secondary importance, as belonging to that area of sentimental devotion to which the figure of Mary is often the object. However, suppose we bear in mind that it is precisely the original sin we are carriers, of that would expose us to perdition without God's help. What is said about Mary takes on its whole meaning. The figure of Mary should not be isolated in her individuality because, as the mother of Jesus, she is of capital importance for all of us.

In the writings of the Cistercian monk Isaac of Stella (d. 1169), a disciple of St Bernard of Clairvaux, we find an obvious formulation of this truth: "In the divinely inspired Scriptures, what is said in general about the Virgin Mother Church is meant in particular about the Virgin Mother Mary; and what is said especially about the Virgin Mother Mary is meant in general about the Virgin Mother Church, and what is said of either of them can be understood independently of either of them. The individual faithful soul can also be considered the Bride of the Word of God, mother-daughter and sister of Christ, virgin

and fruitful. Therefore, all this is said in general for the Church, in a special way for Mary, is in a particular way also for the faithful soul.

"What happened to Mary must be understood, then, for the meaning, it has for us. In the case of her "immaculate" conception, the meaning is twofold. First of all, although our relationship with God is inadequate, distorted, God maintains a clear and positive attitude towards us. Secondly, even though we are deeply marked by a history that is not innocent and which has accumulated so much negativity on the horizon within which we live, there is within us an "immaculate" part from which we can open up to a sincere relationship with God when he comes to meet us."

The result is a Christian vision of man that appears both realistic and positive. It does not need to lie by ignoring the much evil that exists in us and around us. However, despite this, it sustains an attitude of essential trust, of hope in the radical positivity of humankind. This message coincides with what Anne Frank (born in Frankfurt in 1929 and died of typhus in the Nazi camp of Bergen-Belsen in 1945 while still an adolescent) wrote in her justly famous *Diary*, written during the period of hiding before her arrest: "It is a great miracle that I have not given up all my hopes because they seem absurd and unattainable. I still have them, despite everything, because I continue to believe in the intimate goodness of man." □

FACING OUR GIANTS

by Anastasia Dias

It was her first race. She couldn't see anything except the finish line. But she was far behind her competitors. There were murmurs in the stands. Her eyes welled up as she recalled the months and months of training, she had put in. Undaunted by what was happening around her, she started gaining speed. She caught up with her competitors, outran them and won.

She won because she defeated something that had held her back for years – fear. She was afraid of losing, afraid of people judging her after her loss. On the racetrack, she confronted her fears and defeated them, one by one.

Most of us may relate to being afraid at some point in our lives. Our fears may be related to day-to-day happenings or something that we think is going to happen in the future. More than half of the time, our fears are unreal and irrational. But, for the one that faces fear, it seems real, completely rational and daunting.

We've all heard the story of David and Goliath: a shepherd boy, a giant and an unlikely, almost impossible victory. What most of us don't know is the historical context behind David's triumph.

The Israelites and Philistines were at war. There were two hills, and a valley in between the hills. The Philistines occupied one hill, the Israelites the other. The Philistines had an advantage over the Israelites: Goliath. Because of Goliath, no Israelite including the king dared to venture out into enemy territory. 40 days had pass-



ed and every single day Goliath paralyzed the Israelites with fear.

David's older brothers were in the Israelite army. On his father's orders, David left his sheep in the fields to take food to his brothers.

David noticed the commotion that Goliath was causing. The Israelites, including the King, were trembling in fear. David wasn't afraid, he was willing to go and face the giant. But, first, he had to face the resentment of his elder brothers. Then, he had to face the King who told him that he was just a young boy and tried to discourage him.

But this wasn't David's first giant. He had slain many before. It was in the pastures that he had slain the giant of loneliness; it was there that he'd overcome the giant of fear when he killed both lion and bear with his bare hands. It was on the battlefield, that he defeated the giants of his brothers' voices disparaging him. Having slain the giants in his mind, he was ready to do battle with the physical giant – Goliath.

So, David crossed the valley. He reminded himself of the words of a song he had written: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.' And suddenly he came face-to-face with Goliath. He watched every step of the enemy and decided his course of action. With a sling and a single stone, David killed Goliath.

When David realized that the giant had fallen and lay dead on the ground, he took the giant's own sword and cut off his head. He took the giant's head and



weapon along with him, and placed them in his tent as a reminder: THE GIANT IS DEAD.

For the girl on the racetrack, her biggest giant was fear. She'd been afraid all her life. But, on the racetrack, she'd defeated fear when she realized that fear had been limiting her and stealing her of her joy. No longer would she be caught in the clutches of fear. She would defeat it. Pushing back every inhibition, she ran and subsequently won.

This is life for most of us. We are all faced with our own giants: self-limiting beliefs, fears, loneliness and anger to name a few. These giants come in our way stealing our joy, to prevent us from knowing and experiencing the fullness of life.

It is in our hands, as we enter into a brand-new year, with hope in our hearts, to overcome these giants. Each one of us has the power to slay our giants. Like David, as he victoriously held the giant's head in his hand and displayed it. Like the girl, who held up her medal and kissed it, realizing that she was no longer afraid. In the same way, all of us must embrace the New Year with a new 'us,' confident that we can and will slay our giants. □

DON BOSCO IS IN PAKISTAN

Interview with Gabriel (Gabo) Cruz, a missionary in Pakistan

What's your story?

I am Gabriel Cruz, a missionary in Pakistan. I have been a Salesian for 22 years and 13 years a priest. My first encounter with the Salesians was in a small church near the post-novitiate in Mexico City (now the parish of the Immaculate Conception of Mary); the Salesian clerics came there for their apostolate on weekends, especially catechism to children. One of my aunts, who attended Mass there, invited my parents so that my twin brother and I could participate in the activities offered by the Salesians.

I was about 10 years old when I met the Salesians for the first time. Shortly afterwards, my brother and I moved to study at the *Don Bosco Institute in Mexico City*. The sports, artistic, educational and religious activities of the Institute were a new and very beautiful experience for me. For the first time during Easter 1989, I had the opportunity to have a missionary experience in the indigenous communities in the south of the country where the Salesians work.

It was then that I was invited to be part of the Institute's vocation group and that is how I decided to enter the Salesian Novitiate. I made my first profession in August 1997, and immediately sent my first request to be a missionary *ad gentes*; my superiors encour-

aged my decision, but asked me to wait and continue discerning. In June 2006 I was ordained a priest and since then I have worked in Formation Houses (the Aspirantate, Pre-Novitiate and Post-novitiate) as a teacher, Vicar and Rector. Ten years later, in 2016, the Rector Major, Angel Fernandez Arttime, informed me that my missionary request had been definitively accepted and that my destination was to be Pakistan. I received the news with great joy.

While I was waiting for the confirmation of my visa to enter Pakistan, the Dicastery for Missions offered me the opportunity to continue my training, studying a Licentiate in Missionology-Theology of Religions at the Pontifical Gregorian University (PUG) and a specialisation in Islamic Studies at the Institute of Arabic Studies (PISAI) in Rome.

Why Pakistan of all places?

Now I am in Lahore, a city adjacent to the Indian border. We have another house in Quetta, on



the border with Afghanistan. Although we are a new Congregation in the country (just 21 years old) the work of the Salesian Missionaries is recognised both civilly and ecclesiastically.

In May 1998, the Salesian mission in Quetta formally began, after the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò accepted the invitation of Monsignor Joseph Coutts, who is now a cardinal and is affectionately known as the "white-bearded archbishop." Fr Peter Zago, an Italian missionary SDB in the Philippines, was one of the pioneers, and did an extraordinary job in building Salesian works. A year later, Fr Hans Doppeide, a Dutch missionary in Papua New Guinea, started the project for the construction of the Technical Institute in Lahore. It was completed in the year 2000, when Fr Hans was officially able to settle in Pakistan. We are currently a community of three Salesians in Lahore: Fr Noble (Pakistani), Alex (Filipino coadjutor) and myself. In Quetta there are three other brothers: Fr Joel (Filipino), Fr Sami (Pakistani) and Faraz who is an aspirant. Another Vietnamese coadjutor, Francis, after concluding his studies in the Philippines belongs to the Quetta community.

In the Salesian Congregation we have only two Pakistani priests (Fr. Noble and Fr. Sami) and four young men in initial formation: Bernard (Theology), Faraz (Pre-Novitiate), Noel (Post-Novitiate) and Sunil (Novitiate). Here in Lahore we have the vocation group, this year with seven candidates preparing to begin the Aspirancy.

How do you see the future?

The work of the Salesians in

Pakistan is growing and improving. We have an invitation from the Bishop of the Diocese of Hyderabad to open another house in one of the Afghan refugee areas. The future of the Salesians in Pakistan is promising, there is much to offer young people and there are also many of them who want to enter the seminary. One of the problems of living here is not so much the cultural and social situation that comes with living in a Muslim country, nor are we at war as many think. One practical difficulty for foreign missionaries is obtaining a visa; the process is long. On the other hand, our works are not yet self-sufficient, so we need financial assistance from benefactors and associations to enable us to survive and continue helping young Pakistanis. In addition, Salesian life in the community and among the young people, the great witness to the faith of Pakistani Christians and, of course, educational work, are an incentive for every Salesian as they strengthen their faith and their vocation.

Another great challenge we have is the formation of the laity, thanks to whom, the Salesian charism is possible in Pakistan. Having a well-formed group of Salesian Past Pupils and Cooperators is indispensable for the Salesian spirit to grow above all in quality. Another important point is to continue to strengthen joint work with Protestant communities, so that the witness of our faith in Jesus Christ is an impulse for unity. Similarly, work on human rights (especially women's rights) and interreligious dialogue are essential to give our young people and Christian communities a better standard of living. □

Witnesses in & for Our Times



ST. EDMUND CAMPION (DECEMBER 1)

Ian Pinto, sdb

AN UNSETTLED FAITH

Faith is a delicate gift. It is nurtured by the atmosphere around an individual beginning from the family and extending to society and the Church, as well as by the personal care of the individual. Faith is one of the theological virtues. Along with hope and charity, the three are called theological virtues because they come from God and are directed to Him. They are freely given by God to all of humankind. It is up to us how we choose to unwrap those gifts and how we want to make use of them. There is no fixed way of exercising these gifts however, there is a guide – the Holy Bible.

The Bible tells us the goal of faith and offers pointers as to how to practice it but the real challenge is to live it out. It is one thing to read 'God exists' it is quite another to believe in those words with all one's heart and mind. This is the challenge of faith. It doesn't take much to read about faith or to gather knowledge about it but to live it – ah, that is a very different story.



Edmund Campion had problems with his faith. He was born into a Catholic British family but as he grew up he drifted away from Catholicism. He was very intelligent and it was because of his intellectual capabilities and achievements that he began to get noticed by some of the top intellectuals in his home country – England.

Probably with the intention of furthering his achievements and success, he took the Oath of Supremacy. The Oath of Supremacy was required of any person

who wished to serve in public office. The oath consists of swearing allegiance to the monarch – in his case, Queen Elizabeth – as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. In other words, it meant pledging allegiance to the Monarch over and above every other person or power. Failure to do so was considered treason and incurred severe punishment and even death. St. Thomas More was victim of this fundamentalist policy and was consequently beheaded.

Edmund gave up his Catholic faith when he took the oath and subsequently entered the Anglican seminary where he studied to be a priest. Richard Cheyney, the Bishop of Gloucester encouraged Edmund to study for the priesthood and acted as his sponsor. In 1564, he was ordained as an Anglican deacon. However, as he studied the Protestant texts he began to realize that he had made a mistake in renouncing his Catholic faith. Slowly, word spread that Edmund had alternate opinions to Anglican teachings and that he had not fully renounced his Catholic faith. Fearing that they might lose a member to Catholicism, his superiors sent him to Ireland for further study. However, this move proved fruitless and he only became more convinced of his error.

Around this time, there was great tension in the Church. Pope Pius V had excommunicated Queen Elizabeth and she in her turn, set out to persecute Catholics. Edmund was caught in the middle of this faith-fueled fight. He had jumped ship from Catho-

licism to Anglicanism and now he was returning to his childhood faith. This did not sit well with those who knew him.

In order to escape the persecution and to rekindle his faith, he went to Douai, France to study theology. While he was there, he grew fascinated with the Jesuits and joined them. In order to show himself worthy of being accepted to the Jesuit congregation, Edmund travelled to Rome on foot. He put on the clothes of a pilgrim and set off on this lonesome journey perhaps as a sign of repentance and symbolically his return to the Roman Catholic faith! After his acceptance into the Jesuit congregation and on completing all religious requirements, he was sent to teach in the college of Prague which was run by the Jesuits. It was there in 1578 that he was ordained a Catholic priest.

MISSIONARY TO THE HOMELAND

He along with a companion, Fr Robert Persons was chosen to initiate mission England and win back people to the Catholic faith. Edmund was at once struck by feelings of unworthiness and incapability. He informed his superiors that he felt unsuited to the task on account of his demeanour and style of life. Nevertheless, he was encouraged to go.

The missionaries were instructed not to try and attract undue attention to themselves by engaging in mighty works or stirring up the people. To help them achieve their mission they were advised to stay respectfully

distant from young boys and women. The mission received an indirect setback when they learnt that papal-sponsored armed forces had reached Ireland to support the rebellion of James Fitzgerald. Another setback and a direct one this time was that a letter detailing their party and mission had been intercepted by the English and that their whole mission was compromised. They would have to find their own way in as the English would be vigilant for the arrival of a band of Catholic missionaries.

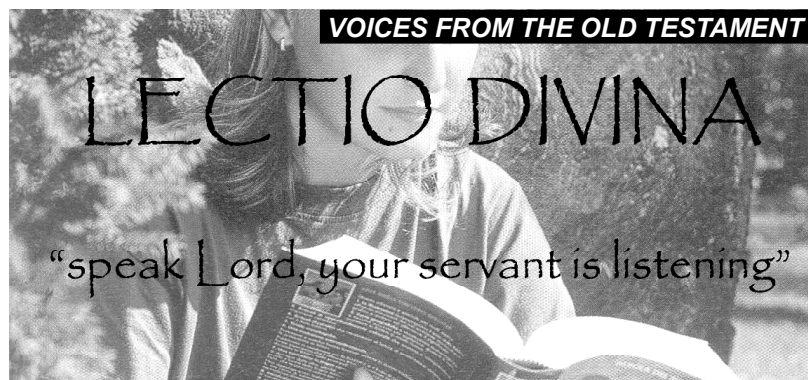
Edmund managed to enter England disguised as a jewel merchant in June 1580. He wasted no time settling down and setting about on his missionary endeavour. Evidently, he wasn't the cautious type as very soon, news of his work reached the ears of the authorities. He was marked as a political threat and guilty of treason. On the insistence of some well-meaning Catholics, Campion wrote a declaration of his motivation behind returning to England. This letter which came to be known as the *Challenge to the Privy Council* or *Campion's Brag* did not help his situation at all. On the contrary, it put a price on his head. He could no longer go about in peace but had to remain on guard always and everywhere. This letter managed to turn an already difficult situation into a treacherous and nearly impossible one.

Edmund went about preaching and administering the sacraments clandestinely. He brought joy and grace wherever he went and his visits boosted the faith of the

Catholics who lived under the oppressive regime. During this time, he also composed a tract *Decem Rationes* or 'Ten Reasons' which dealt with arguments against the Anglican Church and questioning its authority and validity. The Latin text was printed on the quiet and placed on the benches of famous universities like Oxford. Understandably, this caused an uproar and the government sought to capture Edmund desperately.

Finally, his missionary journey came to an end when he was captured at Berkshire where he was preaching. He was arrested immediately and taken to London while being forced to wear an inscription on his hat which read, "Campion, the Seditious Jesuit." He was imprisoned in the Tower of London and interrogated for days. He was offered his freedom, plenty of wealth and the post of Archbishop of Canterbury should he apostasize, but he turned it down saying it went against his conscience. He was sentenced to death along with two other priests and they were hanged, drawn and quartered.

Edmund was just 41 years old but he had done his fair share of mission. He had found the pearl of great price and like the merchant of the gospel, had given up everything to purchase it and treasure it to the end. His faith mattered to him and it was for this reason alone that he went joyfully to his death. Faith comes from God and leads us to God but we have to dare to embrace it. This is what Edmund Campion teaches us: Faith matters! □



BETHLEHEM, LITTLE ONE

by Carlo Broccardo

According to Luke, if we use the word “mercy”, we immediately link it to the Gospel. It is pretty obvious: I think we all carry some of his beautiful parables in our minds and hearts, such as the Good Samaritan or that of the prodigal son (which is better called: of the merciful father). But let us remain in the Old Testament, and trust me, we will realise that the merciful face of God that shines uniquely in Jesus is already present in the pages of the Old Testament.

The passage from the prophet Micah which prepares us directly for Christmas, we will hear on **19 December**. To understand it well, we must remember when Micah lived: at the time of King Hezekiah (716-687 BC); these are the years in which Isaiah also began to prophesy; they are hard years. The people’s greatest fears are two: the first is that the mighty empire of the Assyrians will succeed in breaking through the borders. Like a steam-roller, the strongest army in the world is grinding all of Israel’s neighbours to a pulp. It is only a matter of time - many think - and

we too will be conquered.

The second fear comes from within, from the socio-economic situation, which has reached unbearable levels: The only rule is corruption; the powerful do as they please; the authorities are easily bought off and no one defends the weakest. Times are hard for the poor. In the first chapters of his book, Micah is very severe in denouncing corruption and sin; but then he changes register and goes on to encourage the poor of the earth, the humble of the land: do not be afraid, for God will save his people. But beware, for he will do it in his way.

Our passage begins by speaking of the city of Bethlehem (“Ephratah”



is another name by which the city is sometimes called in the Bible; cf. Ruth 4:11). Today it is a large city, becoming a suburb of Jerusalem; in ancient times, however, it was tiny, a jumble of small houses scattered over the hilly region near the capital. Minor politically (“small for one of the villages of Judah”), but essential for the history of salvation: the Bible repeatedly emphasises that it was in Bethlehem that the great King David was born. He was the ideal king, the one to whom God swore fidelity forever (cf. 2 Sam 7); only his descendants are legitimate kings, and when the Messiah comes, he will surely be of his descent (it is not for nothing that Jesus is called “Son of David”).

There are, therefore, two characteristics of Bethlehem: it is small, but it is important because from there, the greatest of kings came forth, and from there, the Messiah will come. In today’s passage, the prophet Micah emphasises the second characteristic very much; in fact, God says to Bethlehem: “from you shall come forth for me the one who is to be ruler in Israel”. But he does not neglect the first, that is, his smallness. He says that the saviour will come, and he will be from Bethlehem, the city of David, that pile of houses so small that it is almost exaggerated to call it a city, not from the great Jerusalem, but the small Bethlehem.

This, after all, is God’s style! For example, at the time of the judges, he saved his people by raising Gideon, who was certainly not one of the most famous leaders. He said it himself, responding perplexedly to God’s call: “Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? My family is the poorest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house! (Jdg

6:15). It had been the same for David: God had not chosen any of the seven elder brothers but had called the youngest, the one his father had excluded from the beginning (cf. 1 Sam 16:4-13).

There will be hard times, says Micah: the people will be conquered, they will fall into the power of others, but it will not be the end: a day will come when God will remember and raise up a descendant of David, a righteous king who will deliver his people from the oppression of their enemies. As a shepherd watches over his flock, so shall he shepherd Israel, and his dominion be great to the ends of the earth. And he will do it not with the power of arms, but “with the strength of the Lord, with the majesty of the name of the Lord his God” (v. 3). “A king will arise who trusts in God, and he will be peace.”

The prophets of Israel are like that: when they speak of salvation, when they want to instil hope in the hearts of the people, they never announce extraordinary things. The apocalyptic reading will speak of great signs in the sky, cosmic upheavals, giant beasts and mighty angels. The prophets, on the other hand, speak of righteous kings, who like shepherds take the people on their shoulders and care for them; they speak of the descendants of David who do not invent wars to show off their power but build peace in the name of God; they talk of pregnant women, who carry within themselves the hope of an entire people. And this is the face of God’s mercy: the face of people who every day, in his name, strive for a better world, and the face of Jesus, born in Bethlehem of Ephrata, who is reflected in our faces. □

Quiet Spaces

THREE TRAITS

On the morning of December 15, 2015, the Holy Father celebrated Mass at Casa Santa Marthae. The following is the edited English text of the Pope's homily which was delivered in Italian.

What are the features of the People of God? What should the Church be like? This was the theme of Pope Francis' homily for the Mass at Santa Marta on That morning.

In the day's passage from the Gospel according to Matthew (21:28-32), Jesus states to the chief priests and elders: "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you". The Pontiff pointed out Jesus' "energy" in reproaching those who were considered masters of "how to think, judge, and live". The prophet Zephaniah too, in the First Reading (3:1-2, 9-13), "takes on the voice of God and says: 'Woe to her that is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! She listens to no voice, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God'". It is basically "the same reprimand" aimed "at the chosen people, at the clerics of those times". Moreover, the Pope emphasized, "to say to a priest, to a chief priest, that a harlot is holier than he in the kingdom of Heaven" is a very strong charge.

Jesus "had the courage to speak the truth". However, Francis said, considering certain reprimands, one has to wonder: "What should the Church be like? The people we read about in the Bible were indeed "men of the church". They were "heads of the Church". Jesus came, John the Baptist came, but those men "didn't listen". In the passage, the prophet recalls that although God chose his people, "this people became a rebellious city, an impure city. They did not accept how the Church should be, how the People of God should be".

However, the prophet Zephaniah communicates God's promise to the people: "I will forgive you". That is, the Pope explained, in order "for the People of God, the Church, all of us to be faithful, the first step is to feel we are forgiven.

After the promise of forgiveness, there is also the explanation of "how the Church is supposed to be: 'For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord'". Thus, the faithful People of God, Francis continued, must "have these three traits: humble, lowly, with trust in the Lord". At this point the Pontiff began his analysis of each of the three fundamental features.

First of all the Church has to be "humble". In other words a Church should "not show off her powers, her grandeur". However, the Pope advised, "humility doesn't mean a lethargic, weary person" with a demure expression, because this "is not humility, this is theatrics! This is feigned humility". True humility, instead, begins "with the first step: 'I am a sinner'". Francis explained that if "you are not able to tell yourself that you are a sinner and that others are better than you, you are not humble".

Thus, "the first step for a humble Church is feeling that she is a sinner" and the same is true for "all of us". On the other hand, if "any of us has the habit of looking at others' defects and gossiping", this is not humility. It is instead "thinking that you are the judge of others". The prophet says: "I will leave in the midst of you a humble people". This, the Pontiff advised, is a grace, and "we must ask for this grace, that the Church may be humble, that I may be humble, that each one of us may be humble".

His meditation then passed on to the second trait: the People of God "is poor". In this regard Pope Francis recalled that poverty is "the first of the Beatitudes", but what does it mean to be "poor in spirit"? It means "being attached only to God's treasures". It definitely does not mean "a Church that exists attached to money, that thinks about money, that thinks about how to earn money...". For example, the Pope explained, there was someone who "innocently" said to the people that in order to pass through the Holy Door "you have to make an offering". This, the Pontiff clarified, "is not the Church of Jesus, this is the Church of those chief priests, attached to money".

To further explain his thoughts, Francis recalled the story of Deacon Lawrence — the "treasurer of the diocese", — who, when the emperor asked him to "bring the riches of the diocese" to turn them over in order to avoid being killed, St Lawrence returned "with the poor". Thus the poor are actually "the treasure of the Church". You can even be "the head of a bank", as long as "your heart is poor, not attached to money" and you place yourself "at the service" of others. "Poverty", the Pope added, is characterized by "this detachment" which leads us to "serve the needy". He concluded this line of reasoning by directing a question to each person: "Am I or am I not poor?".

Lastly, the third trait: the People of God "shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord". This too brings up a very direct question: "Where do I place my trust? In power, in friends, in money? In the Lord!".

Thus it is this "legacy that the Lord promises us: 'I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord'. Humble because they feel they are sinners; poor because their heart is attached to God's treasures, and if they have them it is only to administer them; seeking refuge in the Lord because they know that the Lord alone can guarantee what is good for them". This is why Jesus had to tell the chief priests, "who did not understand these things", that "a harlot would enter the kingdom of God before them". And, the Pontiff concluded, as we await the Lord this Christmas, let us ask that he give us "a humble heart", a heart that is "poor" and above all that seeks "refuge in the Lord", because "the Lord never disappoints". □

A CHILL IN THE SOUL

Pierluigi Menato (TA/ID)

The boy tore himself away from the table at his father's second stern call, closed his book and, stroking it for quite a while with his pale hand, strolled into the kitchen.

His frail figure appeared on the threshold, facing the waning evening light so that the pale face seemed even gaunter as his eye-lashes blinked nervously.

"How many times must I call you, Conrad! It's so irritating. The whole day, you're stuck with those damned books that I would gladly throw out of the window. You're wearing yourself out. Can't you see you're like a reed in a cane field? One gust stronger than the others will blow you over."

"What are you saying, dad!" dared the boy. "Those beautiful pages make up for the sun that I don't get, and I amuse myself much more than running through the meadows outside."

It was not his studies nor his books that obsessed this little scholar, but a great secret that he kept and guarded fiercely in the depths of his heart. He realized that once he revealed it would incredibly crush his father's mountain-like pride.

Conrad had a tiny flicker of a flame in his soul, not created to light up the darkest streets of his town, but it had become a star that would mark his pathway to Heaven.

Even as a child, on his way up to the village to attend school, Conrad would enter the rectory to greet his old priest friend who taught him about goodness and love towards his

poor and lonely brothers. The old man showed him how a flower grows from the mud and how a star blossoms in the great garden of Heaven.

Such thoughts refined and brightened the boy's unspoiled soul. The only son after two girls, he was his father's pride and his mother's attentive and ardent love. The father, a man ardently sceptical and contemptuous of religion, did not want to hear them pray and invoke God's name.

The youngster, who had reached the end of primary school earlier than his companions, was aware of his father's character, anguished by the terrible disbelief that he did not want to give in.



The lad suffered from his burning dream, consumed himself in prayer and devoured books about Jesus, Our Lady and the saints. Days flew by so quickly that he didn't even notice them. Turning the pages was like walking through a field of flowers, so fascinating.

"Sit here by the fire, Conrad, and tell me sincerely what do you want to do with your life? You know that I have worked for you and the girls for so many years without sparing myself. I have tried to give you everything to make you comfortable and secure. I want to ensure your future."

The boy shuddered; he did not say a word but slowly bowed his head to his chest, a stray tear moistened his trembling eye-lashes.

"What's the matter? Don't you want to tell me, son?"

This silence made the man uncomfortable; a vague uneasiness arose in his heart. Could it be that the rumours circulating in the village were true? Did Conrad, his son, want to become a priest, to study in the seminary? A wave of dull anger burned in his chest. He took the boy's slender wrist in his strong fingers, squeezed it asked:

"Is it true?"

The boy would have liked to cry out in pain, but instead, he looked up into his father's face with a look of divine distance and asked:

"What, papa?"

The voice was so soft that the man felt small in front of his son.

He added more calmly:

"Do you want to become a priest?"

The answer was not long in coming; it sounded as sure as a blast of glory:

"Yes!"

What went through the father's hardened soul? Was it the voice of a man, or was it God's voice? Was it the shame of his scepticism or his secret anxiety for tomorrow? No one knew: the villagers saw him, downcast, staying away from the usual get-togethers of his friends, preferring the company of a very young blonde niece whose soul bespoke heavenly things.

Two months later, Conrad entered the seminary in the nearest town and glorified his God with study and love for his brothers, as the old parish priest had taught him during the days of his boyhood innocence.

Two years passed; the child's lively intelligence revealed promising results. He would come home in his black soutane, and his father would close his eyes and kiss him, each time waiting for him with increasing anxiety.

On a March afternoon, a telegram arrived at the house full of expectation. It came from the city, summoning his desolate parents to Conrad's bedside. A severe attack of meningitis suddenly struck him. The days of torment, crisis and demise passed quickly, quicker than they could fathom. But before he died, his father wanted to take the aching child to the house of his birth. The young man felt a piercing pain in the nape of his neck, but he did not complain; for days and nights, without respite and rest, both father and mother watched over the tiny flame that was dying out.

Sometimes, when his limbs went flaccid with fatigue, his father shuddered; one of those evil words against God came from his

lips, but so softly and so fearfully as not to stain his son's paleness, that it would have been believed to be a breath.

Conrad could barely hear him stammering, anguish in his voice: "Papa!"

He was lost; he wept at his guilt and promised:

"No more, my son; never-more!"

The end came: Conrad did not speak. He held his mother's hand tightly, very tightly; he seemed to sigh for a long time and gently passed away. They carried him away, to the tiny cemetery, in the shadow of the church and the bell tower, where all the fir trees quiver and Heaven's pity falls on the deceased, even the abandoned ones."

The father let them pray beside the body; he wanted Conrad's companions to pay their respects. They were going in and out of the room, their eyes dry. But deep down, he was consumed by grief.

His mother seemed to get delirious; for days and days, she did not speak, she did not taste food, shrouding herself in a dark corner, her gaze motionless on the empty bed. Then the words of her daughters, the sad martyrdom of her husband, slowly resurrected her shattered energies. When reality took her by the throat, she did not complain bitterly. She just came and went

like a shadow. She only felt a sharp chill in her limbs, and no one could warm the poor, parched body. "Now and then, she barely whispered:

"I feel cold! I'm freezing!" And then all was quiet.

But when the agony descended once more and she ran to the cemetery in secret, along unknown paths. It seemed as if a strange power gave her back her strength and life. She tackled the slight slope, running, so as not to be seen, and return home.

The closed gate barred her way; she shook the clanging irons with her poor hands, but the threshold to her son remained closed.

Then, she piled up stones and boulders beside the little wall till with one leap the pile allowed her



to climb over. She had reached the grave, close to Conrad.

Prostrate on the bare earth; she could not remember the prayers of the past; she could only repeat, with so much effort in her heart:

"Son, I am cold! I'm freezing!" Then she returned to the house, a spectacle of bitterness and pain.

One night the mother got up, groped for the key to her wardrobe and opened it. She plunged her face into the clothes of her dead son until her hands gathered a pile of socks and sweaters. With all the wool in her lap, she switched on the light and began to unravel everything.

The yarn gathered into balls filled a whole basket and spread out in short black waves at her feet. She unravelled, unravelled, unceasingly, her son's stockings and pullovers, and in the shadows, her hands were quick and pale.

"What do you want to do?" her husband asked cautiously.

And in his voice was the anguish of watching her go hysterical.

"Just keep quiet," she answered, gathering the dissolved thread at her feet. "Shut up!"

He kept silent. Night after night, because she locked everything in the wardrobe during the day, the mother worked with that wool; the knitting seemed fascinating; her fingers were quick, and her eyes, fixed on the black strip, seemed untiring. Then the last stitch, sanctified by a tear, was over.

"There," she said in another deep voice that no one had heard. "I have finished my son's shawl, the only one that will warm this poor pale body of mine from the cold..."

The husband trembled; standing by the window, he looked at the street and wept.

Now the lonely mother was no longer cold, and she did not tremble. The shawl wrapped her shoulders and her soul. That was how she would preserve his memory in her heart, and with that, she would be able to overcome all the rigours of the road until she reaches Heaven, where her poor cold heart will burn like a torch. "□

THE EMPTY CHAIR

An elderly man had fallen seriously ill. His parish priest went to visit him. As soon as he entered the sick man's room, he parish priest noticed an empty chair placed in a strange position, next to the bed on which the old man lay. He asked him what it was for. The man replied with a faint smile: "I imagine Jesus sitting in that chair and before you came in, I was talking to him... For years, I had found prayer extremely difficult, until a friend explained to me that prayer was about talking to Jesus. So now, I imagine Jesus sitting in a chair in front of me and I talk to him and listen to what he says to me in response. Since then, I no longer have any difficulties in prayer."

A few days later, the elderly gentleman's daughter came to the rectory to inform the parish priest that her father had died. She said: "I just left him alone for a couple of hours. When I came back to the room, I found him dead, his head resting on the empty chair that he always wanted next to his bed." "Blessed are the pure in heart; they shall see God." (Mt. 5, 8).

FIORETTI OF DON BOSCO -23

by Michele Molineris

129. How you disgrace our family! (1864)

One Saturday evening, in 1864, Tomatis Domenico, Francesco Vicini and Paolo Aiachini, had come out of their study to go to confession and met Don Bosco who was returning to the Oratory. Resting his hand on Vicini's head, Don Bosco asked, "Are you a friend of Don Bosco?"

"Of course," Vicini replied.

"You want to go to heaven, don't you? All right, you have my permission."

"Ad you," he went on, resting his hand on Aiachini's head, "are you also Don Bosco's friend?"

"You bet!" Aiachini answered.

"You too want to go to heaven, don't you? Well, I'll let you go too."

He then turned to Tomatis. "How about you?" he asked. "Are you too Don Bosco's friend? After all, we two will have a lot of munching to do together."

Then addressing all three, he asked, "Where are you going?"

"To confession!"

"All right, I'll just go up to my room for a minute and I'll be right down."

After the semester exams, Aiachini fell sick and was sent home to recover, but on the evening of March 31, 1863 Celestine Durando announced, "Your school mate [Paul] Aiachini, died a saintly death."

On returning to the Oratory in the fall, Tomatis was astonished not to find his friend Vicini. What could have happened? When Vicini told his father that he

wanted to become a priest, the man declared that he would never allow it. Moreover, he did not let the boy return to the Oratory. Grieved by this decision, the unhappy lad began to waste away so rapidly as to move people to pity. After a careful checkup, the doctor told the lad's father, "There is nothing physically wrong with him. His vital organs are quite sound. His illness is not physical. You must find out what the matter is."

The man understood. "Rather than see you pine away like this," he told his son, "I prefer that you go back to the Oratory."

Within days the boy was quite his old self again. But then his father began to stall, hoping to bend the boy's will. The lad said nothing for a time. When he renewed his request to return to the Oratory because he wanted to become a priest, his father countered sullenly, "Don't you see how you disgrace our family?" the youngster kept silent and shortly afterward relapsed into his former illness. "I tell you again," the doctor cautioned the father, "your son's illness is not physical. Only you can find a way to save his life." The fondly loving father finally yielded. He went to his son's bedside and again promised then and there. "Too late," the boy whispered. "Call the pastor. I think I am dying. All I ask is that, as soon as I am dead, you write to the Oratory so that my school mates may pray for me."

Not believing that his son was critically ill, the man delayed until evening. By that time things looked so bad that he hastily called a priest. Vicini died peacefully, comforted by the Last Sacraments as he prayed.

Vicini had witnessed a multiplication of the hosts during a mass of Don Bosco in which the saint, to satisfy the devotion of a dozen young men, had divided the blessed Host into four and had given each a quarter, although he had had to resort to successive fractions.

Here there is a clear reason for those parents who, out of misguided love, prevent their children from following their vocation. It is therefore an invitation to their generosity that comes spontaneously after the fact that we have quoted from the Life of Don Bosco. Jesus, after all, as Don Bosco himself testified, used to take the place of the son consecrated to God or in religion. And isn't that a nice change? (from EBM., VII, 387-388).

130. Reserved for alumni (1864)

The other day, Don Bosco said, I was in Asti, waiting for the carriage that was to take me to Villanova. While I was there all alone, I saw a gentleman approach me, with a well-grown beard and a very courteous appearance.

- Oh! Are you Don Bosco? - he said, taking my hand to kiss it.

- Me? Yes, I am Don Bosco. May I know to whom I have the honour of speaking?

"Oh! I'll tell you at once; because you can't imagine the pleasure I feel at seeing him again after so many years. And here he told me who he was. Then, as if a remorseful feeling was pressing on his heart, he took out his wallet from his pocket, and put two or three ten-franc notes into my hand.

"Oh; oh! what generosity!"

"It is little for that grace which

the Lord has sent me. This is but a very small repayment. I hope that in future I shall be able to do more."

"Thank you, my dear."

"Thank you? And it is Don Bosco who tells me this? May you never hear this word again. But I would like you to know a little episode, which you will be able to recount in due course for the benefit of those youngsters whom Providence sends you."

"What is it?"

"You will have to go back to the day I left the Oratory. I was very young then, only fourteen years old. It seemed to me that I could go from this place and, on my way home, set up some kind of business. So, goodbye gratitude, goodbye misery!"

"I left with these dreams in my head, and when I arrived at the porter's lodge, knowing that I was spiteful to the man who was there, I led him out, and making a cross on the dust with my foot, I had the audacity to say to him: "Never again in here!"

The good man, who was indignant, ran after me with his broom, shouting: "Insolent, wait, or I'll give you a cross!"

"But I had quicker feet, and before he could take two steps, I was already on the corner of the Oratory, where Cottolengo Street is now."

"As if I had won a great victory, I walked towards the station, where I was to catch the train to C. It was early, and I had to wait. I had been given breakfast by the Oratory... but I could not resist the temptation to buy myself three or four lire worth of grapes and bread, which I devoured again. At that age, one would eat at any

time."

"In the meantime, the sign was given to go and get the ticket. What was my surprise to hear him say, 'We are four lire short!'"

"I had the simplicity to say to the ticket-seller: 'Give it to me anyway! It doesn't matter to you anyway!'"

The ticket-taker looked at me, and smilingly gave me back the money, saying: "When you get the four lire, you come back!"

People came and went, took their tickets, paid, and when they entered the station, they went to get into the train. And I stood there and watched, not daring to ask anyone for that little charity.

"So, we must go back to the Oratory? I'll go to Don Bosco, and he won't leave me in the lurch."

I went back; but there, like a faithful dog, stood the porter. As soon as he saw me, he stood on guard to better watch the door....

"Oh, you're here, he said; try to get through!"

I tried two or three times to get in without his noticing, but it was impossible. Finally, I said to him: "Do what you want but let me in; but I need to speak to Don Bosco."

"Yes? But first you have to do something."

"And what is that?"

"And what is that? Erase that cross?"

"Only?"

"Nothing else."

So saying he took me by the hand, led me mechanically to where it continued to be kept as if it were guarded, and obliged me to erase it. "Now," he said, "you have done penance, and that is enough for me. May this lesson serve you to be more careful in future. I entered the Oratory, and

if it were not for the fact that obedience was calling me home, I would never have left it." (Francesia, *Le passeggiate*, 250-53).

131. How is it that you always have a dog in front of you? (1864)

In April 1864 there was a boy at the Oratory named P... who would have nothing to do with the sacraments or prayers. He was there by force. One day Don Bosco took him aside. "Why is there always a fierce dog snarling and snapping at you?" he asked him.

"I don't see any dog."

"I do! Tell me, how does your conscience feel?" the boy hung his head.

"Take heart," Don Bosco went on. "Come with me and everything will be alright." The youngster became Don Bosco's friend and is now determined to do good. (EBM., VII p. 391)

132. And how dare you go to communion with sin in your heart? (1864)

Don Bosco revealed that every now and then the priest [saying the Community Mass] would skip some boy at the altar rail at Communion time. When the boy would later ask him in the playground why he had not given him Communion, the priest would reply, "How dare you go to Communion with sin on your soul? Don't you see how black and hideous your soul is?" The priest knew this by the tongue's colour at that moment. Several times he appraised Don Bosco so that he could repair the harm done by bad confessions (EBM., VII, 491).

IN A CHEERFUL MOOD

New Car

The first Sunday after my husband and I bought a new car, we parked it in the last row of the church lot not wanting to be ostentatious. While talking with friends after the service, my husband accidentally hit the panic button on his electronic key. Immediately the car's horn blared and its lights flashed. Watching my husband fumble with the button, his friend teased, "Wouldn't it have been better taste to just put a few lines in the church bulletin?"

Tea Service

One day my mother was out and my dad was in charge of me and my brother who is four years older than I am. I was, maybe, one and a half years old and had just recovered from an accident in which my arm had been broken. Someone had given me a little 'tea set' as a 'get well' gift and it was one of my favourite toys. Daddy was in the living room engrossed in the evening news and my brother was playing nearby when I brought my Daddy a little cup of 'tea', which was just water.

After several cups of tea and lots of praise for such yummy tea, my Mom came home. My Dad made her wait in the living room to watch me bring him a cup of tea, because it was 'just the cutest thing!'

My mom waited and sure enough, here I come down the hall with a cup of tea for Daddy and she watches him drink it up, then says, 'Did it ever occur to you that the only place that baby can reach to get water is the toilet?'

Circles

During basic army training, a sergeant was telling his group how a submachine gun sprayed bullets. He drew a circle on the blackboard and announced that it had 260 degrees. "But sergeant, all circles have 360 degrees," remarked one of the trainees.

"Don't be stupid," the sergeant roared. "This is a small circle."

The End is Near

A local priest and pastor stood by the side of the road holding up a sign that said, "The End is Near! Turn yourself around now before it's too late!" They planned to hold up the sign to each passing car.

"Leave us alone, you religious nuts!" yelled the first driver as he sped by. From around the curve they heard a big splash.

"Do you think," said one clergyman to the other, "we should just put up a sign that says, 'bridge out of order' instead?"

Mom's Phone

Because my mother had a habit of losing her cordless phone, I bought her a phone with a clip on it so she could attach it directly to her belt. A few days later, I walked into my mother's home and found her standing in the middle of the living room, half dressed. That didn't strike me as odd so much as the fact that she was holding her pants to the side of her head and speaking into them.

"Don't look at me that way," she yelled. "The phone started ringing and I couldn't figure out how to undo this stupid clip!" □



Reflecting on Mary

VICTORY OVER EVIL

by Sergio Pellini

8 December 1854: Pope Pius IX solemnly defines the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. In other words, he declared with clarity and authority what Christian people had believed for many centuries: that Mary was entirely pure, and therefore exempt from all sin.

But why this privilege? So that she might become a worthy mother of Christ. Jesus Christ could only become incarnate, become one of us in a perfectly holy creature.

The book of Genesis reminds us how the human condition was ruined with Adam's and Eve's first rejection of God.

However, nothing is definitively lost. The coming of the New Adam (Christ) with the collaboration of Mary, the new Eve and symbol of the Church, restores the balance that had been lacking.

The Immaculate Conception is the SIGN that, with Christ's resurrection, evil has already been

defeated from the start since a creature has been full of grace from the first moment of its existence. Moreover, the devil knows this! However, despite this, he uses all his INVENTIVENESS to create CONVINCING illusions!

Let us look around! Let us look at the daily news! Wickedness, violence, and SELFISHNESS seems to prevail everywhere!

Mary Most Holy, saved from original sin, next to Christ she is also the guarantee that in the world, GOOD IS STRONGER AND MORE CONTAGIOUS THAN EVIL. With her, the first one to be redeemed, a story of contagious grace begins.

We could still ask ourselves: what mystery lies at the origin of Mary and every creature? St. Paul enlightens us by reminding us that each of us is predestined to be a SON IN THE SON, to be one with Jesus. However, beware: it will depend on our response!

Mary said: "Yes, let God's will be done in me." From that moment on,

she became the Mother of God, and as a mother, she rejoiced with her Son and suffered with him too!

She responded to God's love with all of herself.

Moreover, we, do we have the courage to say every day: "Lord, Here I am! Thy will be done?" Furthermore, this, not only when everything goes well when we enjoy good health, but especially when everything goes wrong!...

Let us remember that we are all claimed and loved by God, but each of us has his unmistakable place in humanity; each must work in an upright way, without blemish and in charity. Mary does this undoubtedly in the first place by her availability. She has made her indispensable contribution to the salvation of all people.

However, she too had to grow in faith, dedication, obedience, love and hope. Moreover, she is an example to us.

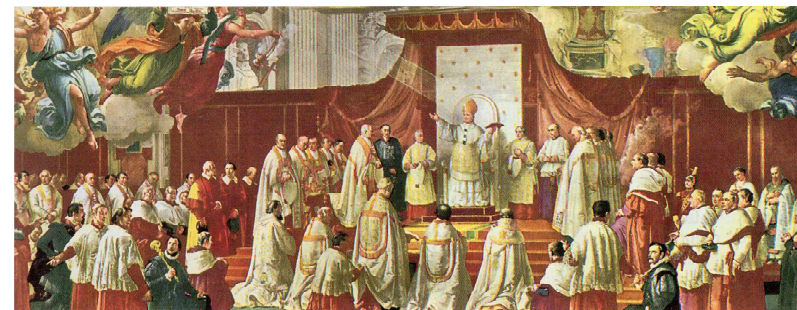
Mary teaches us that it is necessary to "DO" rather than "TALK"!

In 1854 Don Bosco was 39 years old. His work was growing rapidly, but he never neglected Mary, inspirer and support of the Society of St. Francis de Sales. For him and his Salesians, she was and always continues to be a teacher and guide. He, too, was caught up in the enthusiasm and devotion to Mary that was spreading throughout the Catholic world.

He spoke about it every evening to his youngsters, and the novena of the Immaculate Conception was lived with great fervour at the oratory in Valdocco.

Talking in the courtyard or his office, he would ask the boys what they wanted to give Our Lady for her feast. Dominic Savio had answered him: "I want to wage a merciless war against mortal sin, and I want to pray so much to the Lord and Our Lady that they would rather let me die than let me fall into sin."

We can say that the devotion to the Immaculate Conception was one of the primary educational means used by Don Bosco to make



A Detail from the Hall of the Immaculate Conception
by Francesco Podesti (1800-1895)



God's grace and religious vocations flourish in his work. Today, why do we invoke and pray to Mary Immaculate?

First of all, so that she may guide the consciences of our young people and those of all men and women who are often disoriented and far from God and the experience of his love.

Let us pray fervently for our world is in need of CONVERSION. Consciences have been darkened as they did at the time of the first sin, no longer capable of distinguishing between good and evil.

Many no longer know what sin is and no longer dare to know, as if this knowledge could condition

their freedom. For the sake of scruples, one might ask: "Has the Church and her teachers been mistaken? Have they not demanded enough of their faithful?"

I believe that the answer to the problem does not lie precisely here, but in becoming aware that man, in his sacred freedom, is tempted by easy living and human progress; he forgets his fragility and need to be constantly aware of God. Furthermore, precisely because of this constant bewilderment, we are called to bear witness to the primacy of God and his law in our life.

Let us ask Mary again to help us overcome the seductions of EVIL with GOOD and help the upcoming generations, in particular, to grow in holiness, especially the young people who are so dear to us today as their fidelity to God is tried more than ever.

It is still difficult to convince today's world of the misery of its sin and the salvation that God continually offers through the reconciliation brought about by Redemption. However, the sinless Virgin calls us here to this primordial need: to CONVERSION, she says to us: pray for sinners; come and wash yourselves, purify yourselves, take up a new life! Convert and believe the Gospel: she gives new relevance to these very first words of Jesus in the Gospel.

Let us ask Mary to obtain for all of us the light of faith and for those who have it the coherent witness of their life of faith. □



GOD'S INSCRUTABLE WAYS

Fr. Wilfred D'Souza, sdb

When I left home for the first time in 1959, God was leading me as with Abraham, into a distant unknown land of Tiruppattur in South India. The years sped fast under the untiring guidance of eminent persons who instilled in me Salesian idealism, right through my initial formation.

Soon, the years of Theology, accompanied by holy and erudite Salesian Teachers, brought me to the day of my Priestly Ordination on 19th December 1971. The years that followed have been golden years in which I have experienced God's never failing presence, holding me by the hand and leading me on. As I celebrate the Golden Jubilee of my Priesthood, I can only cry out with Mary, "The Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is His name."

My early priestly years were lived in the glow of the evolving effects of the Second Vatican Council that brought about an "aggiornamento" – an awakening that was preparing the Church for the Modern World. I was caught up in the euphoria of the richness that emanated from the teachings and the renewed approaches to Catholic thinking. This spurred me on to shape my pastoral and apostolic goals, and led me to choose as my ordi-



nation motto: "To proclaim the Good News of God" [1Thess 2:2].

God further blessed me with the opportunities for pursuing specialization in the study of Catechetics and Liturgy that I completed in Rome and the U.S. This valuable exposure prepared me for a long duration of Seminary teaching, first, for almost all of the 20 years of my missionary experience in Africa, and I continue today, back in India, in Goregaon and Nashik. It gives me the greatest joy and

fulfillment, in sharing the teachings of the Church with so many who are hungering and thirsting for this knowledge.

As I pen these lines, we are now caught up in the new awakening of the Church that Pope Francis calls "Synodality - a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission". There is so much hope and promise when I see innumerable young people in lively youth groups, as well as the laity, excitedly seeking to know and spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The same Lord Jesus who walked the streets of Galilee is walking amongst us today. He is entering your homes and your hearts. He is searching for good Catholic families that are bringing up generous young men and women. Just like Peter and the first Apostles, and thousands of

*Parents you have
a great
responsibility
to encourage
your children
to respond
wholeheartedly.*

Priests and Religious after them, can you hear his call, "Come follow me", right in the middle of your busy life? Parents, you have a great responsibility to encourage your children to respond wholeheartedly. I can assure you in His name that you also can have an exhilarating experience of what God is able to fashion out of your simple lives. Accept 'the call' and feel the difference in your life. □

LOOK WHERE YOU'RE GOING!

In ancient times, in Japan, paper and bamboo lanterns were used, with candles inside. One night someone offered a blind man a lantern to take home.

"I don't need a lantern," said the blind man.

"Dark or light are the same for me."

"I know you don't need a lantern to find your way," replied the man, "but if you don't someone can come after you. So, you must take it."

The blind man left with the lantern, but he had not gone very far when he was violently bumped.

"Look where you're going!" exclaimed the blind man to the stranger.

"Don't you see this lantern?"

"Your candle has gone out, brother," replied the stranger.

Who doesn't know those arrogant people who disturb the world through their presumptuous ways without realizing that, like the blind man they are carrying unlit lanterns? Yet, many call themselves "teachers," or "doctors," or "reverends." □



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AN ANNUAL INDICATOR

Bernard McGuckian, SJ

I have heard it said that more people are admitted to psychiatric care in the weeks after Christmas than at any other period of the year. Could this be true, if so why?

Christmas is the culmination of Advent, a month-long season filled with hope. The focus of the daily readings at Mass is the *Chosen People* waiting in joyful hope for the coming of the Messiah. The figure of John the Baptist looms large in these readings with his promise of something wonderful on the horizon.

As Christmas nears the spotlight turns to Our Lady as the time for her delivery approaches. There is an air of expectancy that keeps increasing until it reaches a climax on Christmas Night. If this hope is frustrated it is not surprising that the end result should turn out to be disappointment and even depression. I am not sure of the statistic mentioned but if people already fragile are let down in big numbers at such a high point in the year then the scenario you describe is likely enough.

Joy and Hope

Even in our secularized world where the religious meaning of Christmas has faded from many lives, its promise of better things still lingers on. Its joy and hope are contagious. Dickens captured it well in *A Christmas Carol*, where the approach of the feast moves the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge to think about others.

For the business world it has become the biggest selling point of the year as we all know only too well, literally to our cost. This

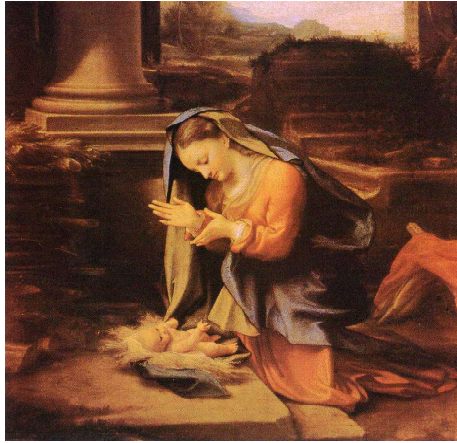
commercial dimension has become so dominant that people celebrate Christmas even in Asiatic countries where the impact of Christianity is minimal. The whole world wants to get in on the act.

For most of the human race, because of the preponderance of the English language, it is the Mass of Christ (the literal meaning of Christmas) that, unwittingly, is the focus of attention. In the Romantic languages like French or Italian it is his birth (*Noel* or *Natale*). Could there be some hidden providence in the fact that at least on one occasion each year so many of the human race unconsciously celebrate the Mass of Christ?

Family Life

In a Christian home modelled on that of Bethlehem and Nazareth, Christmas should never be experienced as anything other than a blessing. If depression overtakes an individual or unhappiness a family in the last days of December it probably stems less from what takes place on the 25th than from what was or was not going on in their lives during the other twelve months of the year.

If members of a family make a reasonable effort to be faithful to their baptism through the year by prayer, self-control, mutual forgiveness and recourse to the sacraments they can rest assured that their coming together at Christmas



In a Christian home modelled on that of Bethlehem and Nazareth, Christmas should never be experienced as anything other than a blessing.

will be experienced as a time of blessing and peace.

Harsh Reality

There is a lot of evidence, however, that this is not the experience in many homes. If the person of Jesus and his liberating teaching are excluded as irrelevant in the lives of baptized Christians, there will be repercussions sooner or later. This often becomes painfully obvious at Christmas when no amount of artificial good cheer can compensate for the void within.

The harsh reality of Christmas for so many, particularly wide-eyed, impressionable children is premature exposure to adult bickering and verbal abuse, frequently ending up in alcohol-fuelled violence.

Archbishop Joseph Cassidy once said that 'the worst thing about excessive drinking is not the men that it makes drunk but the children that it makes afraid'.

Such behaviour is a far cry from the wonderful proclamation of the angels at Bethlehem: Glory to God in high heaven and peace on earth to men and women of goodwill.

Glory of Life

Reflecting on this message, St. Irenaeus, one of the early Fathers of the Church, came to understand that God is truly glorified by human beings who are fully alive. Indeed it was to raise all human life to a new level that Jesus came on earth. He would later tell his followers that he came so that 'they might have life and have it in abundance'. If this offer is

consistently ignored in the life of an individual or a family, it is very hard for the Lord to share this abundance or make his delightful presence felt at Christmas or indeed at any other time of the year.

As for 'goodwill', St. Therese of Lisieux, who according to many commentators changed from a child into a giant during the night of Christmas, 1886, said that the devil hates nothing more in this world. Satan, known by St. Ignatius of Loyola as the 'enemy of our human nature' is powerless against goodwill. He will try every ruse to break it. He knows that it leads to peace, a foretaste of the heaven that he abhors. In a family, if there is basic goodwill towards one another, there will be ongoing happiness during all the months of the year that will only increase at Christmas; otherwise, there will not.

A happy Christmas to you! ☐
(From: *The Sacred Heart Messenger*, Ireland, December 2006)

LOVING CHILDREN TO THEIR LOVING MOTHER

On June 5, 2021 around 6pm there was a loud thud in the bathroom. My grandchild was in the shower. We all ran towards the bathroom door which was locked. On calling out to her we received no response. After a few anxious minutes of continuous calling and door-knocking she finally responded saying she had fallen and is ok. We kept insisting that she open the door.

It took sometime and as soon as we heard the door knob unlock my daughter pushed herself into the slim opening behind the door. The next second she came crashing down on my daughter, and unable to take her weight, they both crashed to the floor. She was unconscious, limp and wouldn't respond, lying on the floor. After approximately 3-4 minutes we wrapped her in a towel and managed to get her to sit on the toilet seat. Then we gave her some water to drink and 40 seconds later she kind of regained her consciousness. She could not and still has no recollection of what transpired in the shower or how she managed to unlock the door.

Miraculously, she did not have any visible bruises or injury from the two falls. The doctors at the hospital conducted several tests and we returned home without any complications being detected. My grateful thanks to Jesus and Mother Mary Help of Christians for protecting her. We are sure that Mother Mary and Jesus held her in their arms and guided her to open the cubicle door and then the main door of the bathroom so that we could enter.

Louis Cajetan & Maria Ilda Fernandes

My sincere and heart felt thanks to the Divine Mercy, Abba Father, Mother Mary and to all the saints for blessing me with a normal healthy baby girl, a safe delivery and for other favours granted too.

A Devotee

During the course of admission and treatment my wife had to undergo various investigations viz. USG, CT scans abdomen and chest, X-Rays of her chest and various blood tests. During this period we had to undergo agonizing moments, because each test would reveal different results and most of the time was very shocking, as described by the treating Drs. then. With all the prayers everywhere, Our Lady of Rosary have interceded for us and she was healed and discharged from the hospital after almost a week.

Orlando do Rosario and family, Goa

THE POPE'S WORLDWIDE NETWORK OF PRAYER

DECEMBER 2021

Intention for evangelization - Catechists

Let us pray for the catechists, summoned to announce the Word of God: may they be its witnesses, with courage and creativity and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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posted at Mumbai Patrika Channel Sorting Office
on 1st & 2nd of every month
Date of Publication: 1st of every month

Subs: (one copy Rs. 20/-); **Inland Rs. 200p.a;** **Airmail: Rs 500 p.a.**

MARY WAS THERE

It was raining on Wednesday September 8, but my wife Lisa, deciding to take advantage of a break in the rains, decided to visit the chemist and on the way home, buy a few groceries. She always recites the Rosary whenever she goes out alone. On her return home, she slipped in the slush by the corner of the road and fell heavily on her back with the two heavy bags she was carrying. Passersby rushed to her aid and offered to reach her home, but she got up, carried her heavy bags and came home by herself, doubtless covered with slush all over her clothes and feet, with only a little graze on her elbow and a slight backache. It was Our Lady who came to her rescue without whose help this would not have happened. A miracle indeed!

Lester Santos, Vasai

Don Bosco's Madonna, has developed to its present form from a folder published in 1937, by late Fr Aurelius Maschio, on behalf of the Salesians of Don Bosco, Bombay.

The magazine is sent to all who ask for it, even though there is a fixed subscription (Rs 200/- India & Rs 400/- Airmail)). We trust in the generosity of our readers/benefactors.

Whatever you send us will help cover the expenses of printing and mailing; the surplus if any, is devoted to the support of orphans and poor boys in our schools and apostolic centres.

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