And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

(John 1:14)
The Criterion mailed to all households this week

This week’s issue of The Criterion, which features our annual Christmas Supplement on pages 9-16, is being mailed to all households in the archdiocese, including those that don’t normally receive the newspaper.

The Criterion is Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein’s primary evangelization tool. This issue includes a review of 2006 from local, national and international perspectives, and our regular features, which include Archbishop Buechlein’s “Seeking the Face of the Lord” column. To all of you who already subscribe, we thank you, and to those of you who don’t regularly receive The Criterion, we hope you spend some time with this issue and consider receiving it each week.

To subscribe to The Criterion, call our office at 317-236-1570 or toll-free at 800-382-9836, ext. 1570, or visit our Web site at www.CriterionOnline.com.

—Mike Krosos, editor

Canonization of Indiana’s first saint tops local news in 2006

By Brandon A. Evans

Each December, media outlets look back at the passing year and recall the stories that have earned a special place in our memory.

For the Catholic press, this is no different (see Catholic News Service story, page 3), and it’s the same for the editorial staff of The Criterion, who recently put their heads together to come up with the top 10 local stories of 2006.

The following are the stories that made our top 10 list:

1. The canonization of St. Theodora Guerin

As one of the top American Catholic news stories as well as one of the top Indiana news stories, this was the obvious top choice for our staff.

The pace with which this story developed was almost dizzying: A Cause of Canonization had been started in 1909 and it took until 1998 to see the beatification of Blessed Mother Theodore Guerin.

By last year, we learned that a second miraculous healing attributed to Blessed Mother Theodore had “been unanimously recognized by a five-person medical commission as a cure unexplainable by medical science.” The signs in 2005 of the commission as a cure unexplainable by medical science. The signs in 2005 of the commission as a cure unexplainable by medical science.

In 2006, the cause for canonization was opened and the world began to ramp up.

On June 1, seven people were murdered in their home in the worst mass killing in Indianapolis history. The funeral for six of the residents—a Hispanic family that included three children—was held at the shrine of St. Theodora.

The prominent presence of Catholic clergy left no doubt that this was an issue that was intrinsically tied to our faith.

2. Thousands participate in march for immigration reform

Especially being a mid-term election year, the pace with which this story developed was strong in national news.

But one of the leading stories was immigration reform, and one of the defining moments of that debate took place on April 10 as people around the United States took part in a “Day of Action for Immigration Justice.”

On June 1, thousands of people marched through the downtown.

Vatican leaders met, the pope got involved in a “Day of Action for Immigration Justice.” The world began to ramp up.

3. Hundreds turn out for funeral of slain family

Indianapolis residents were numbed by another record in 2006, but this time it was a tragic and heartbreaking one.

On June 1, seven people were murdered in their home in the worst mass killing in Indianapolis history. The funeral for six of the residents—a Hispanic family that included three children—was held at the shrine of St. Theodora.

4. The pace with which this story developed was almost dizzying: A Cause of Canonization had been started in 1909 and it took until 1998 to see the beatification of Blessed Mother Theodore Guerin.

5. A somber Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein incensed the six caskets during the bilingual Mass, and Father Michael O’Mara delivered the homily.

6. “May our response not be hate or the desire for more death—even for those who have carried out this violence—but the desire to build the kingdom of God here on this Earth, in this city,” Father O’Mara urged those present.

See YEAR, page 21

On the cover

Mary and the Christ Child appear in this fragment from a larger 16th-century piece by Bernardino Luini. The Dec. 25 Christmas feast commemorates the incarnation of the divine Word at the birth of Christ. (CNS photo/Erich Lessing, Art Resource)
**January**

Explosion traps 13 coal miners in West Virginia mine; 12 die. New Zealand study shows higher mental health risk for women after abortion. Vatican report says child labor rising with more than 200 million children under 14 forced to work. Vatican agency reports 26 missionaries were murdered in 2005. New Jersey enacts moratorium on use of death penalty. Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of Orlando, Fla., chairman of international policy committee of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, urges “responsible transition” to full Iraqi self-rule. Pope Benedict XVI urges Italian officials not to legalize abortion pill or same-sex unions. New York appellate court upholds state law mandating contraceptive coverage in prescription insurance plans. U.S. Supreme Court upholds Oregon’s assisted suicide law and New Hampshire law requiring parental consent for a minor’s abortion. Court upholds Oregon’s assisted suicide law.

**March**

Washington Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, other religious leaders defend national interfaith immigration reform campaign following political attack on it. Letter to Canadian bishops from representatives of more than 200 religious orders, calling Church too rigid and clerical, is leaked to media. Bishop William S. Sklystad of Spokane, Wash., USCCB president, is accused of sexual abuse of a minor; he denies claim. Catholic aid agencies warn repeated droughts have put 3.5 million Kenyans in danger of starvation. Boston Catholic Charities halts adoption programs because state law makes it offer adoptive services to same-sex couples. Chicago immigration rally draws 100,000. Catholic Franciscans reach $28 million settlement with 25 sex abuse victims. Bishops’ Administrative Committee reiterates opposition to legal recognition for same-sex marriages. Vatican shifts to emphasis on cultural exchange as basis for interreligious dialogue. The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church is published in English and Spanish by U.S. bishops. Arlington (Va.) Diocese allows female altar servers, leaving Lincoln, Neb., as only U.S. diocese still banning female altar servers. Dialogue with Islam is among topics of papal meeting with world’s cardinals. New clergy sex abuse audits of U.S. dioceses are released; National Review Board says higher performance standards are needed in future audits. Analysis of new audits shows clergy sex abuse cost to Church has topped $1.5 billion in last 50 years, almost all of it since 2002. Abdul Rahman, Afghan who faced death penalty for converting from Islam to Christianity, is released from prison and allowed to take asylum in Italy. Pope Benedict XVI urges Italian Bishops, urges “responsible transition” to full Iraqi self-rule. Pope Benedict XVI urges Italian officials not to legalize abortion pill or same-sex unions. New York appellate court upholds state law mandating contraceptive coverage in prescription insurance plans. U.S. Supreme Court upholds Oregon’s assisted suicide law and New Hampshire law requiring parental consent for a minor’s abortion. Court upholds Oregon’s assisted suicide law.

**February**


**Boston**

Archdiocese calls financial straits “dire” with $46 million deficit in 18 months. Vatican marks 500th anniversary of laying of cornerstone for St. Peter’s Basilica. Philadelphia Cardinal Justin Rigali calls constitutional amendment “only practical way” to protect traditional definition of marriage. Cardinals, in Washington for Catholic University of America fundraising dinner, converge on Capitol Hill to lobby for human immigration reform. Bishops urge end to genocide in Darfur region of Sudan as “Save Darfur” rallies are held in cities across United States. Portland (Ore.) Archdiocese, facing bankruptcy proceedings over clergy sex abuse, announces $1 million cut in budget for central offices. Pope Benedict XVI issues his first encyclical, “Deus Caritas Est” (“God is Love”), in his private library at the Vatican on Jan. 23. The pope said his aim in the encyclical is to “speak of the love which God lavishes upon us and which we in return must share with others.”

**June**

Top-level U.N. conference on top the news.
The Holy Land in 2006

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, this year we find reasons for cautious optimism that the situation in the land where he was born might improve. That’s the way we began our editorial last year. Unfortunately, our reasons for optimism soon faded. We thought then that Ariel Sharon’s new party, Kadima, would win Israel’s election in March, and that he would continue efforts to return land to the Palestinians. Instead, Sharon suffered several severe strokes and was succeeded by Ehud Olmert. We were also cautiously optimistic because the Palestinians had elected Mahmoud Abbas as their president. We believed that Sharon and Abbas would continue their efforts toward peace. But then the Hamas Party won the Palestinians’ Jan. 25 election, putting men in power who refused to recognize Israel’s right to exist.

The result of this situation in the Holy Land appears worse today than it was a year ago. Much worse considering what happened in Lebanon this year, when, after being provoked by Hezbollah, Israel invaded the country and destroyed much of it. Hezbollah, which is why they elected Olmert to be prime minister after Sharon’s strokes. He should be a willing participant in the comprehensive peace negotiations we hope will occur next year.

We believe that there is finally some recognition on the part of governments in the Middle East, as well as in the West, that there must be a comprehensive settlement between Israel and the Arabs. Therefore, we believe that more efforts will be made—by Arab governments, Israel, and the United States—to find that settlement.

We should listen to Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem, who said during a Nov. 2 interview with Catholic journalists from the United States, “The main question for the U.S. administration and for Israeli policy is survival. But if the United States wants Israel to survive, to be recognized, then it should take measures to surround Israel with friends. But current U.S. policy is surrounding Israel with enemies. That’s not the way to protect your friend.”

It’s quite possible that only peace in the Middle East can save the ancient Churches of that region. That we agree with Jesus Father Drew Christiansen, who wrote in America magazine on Sept. 11, “Middle Eastern Christians [Catholics, Orthodox, Copts, other oriental Christians, Protestants and evangelicals] are a resilient people, who have endured the coming and going of empires for two millennia. Given a chance, they will rebound.”

Father Christiansen also wrote, “In a very real sense, the survival of Christianity in the Middle East, particularly of the Eastern Catholic Churches, depends on what happens in Lebanon, home to a number of Eastern patriarchates and to the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East.”

As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there are signs that many of the Palestinians now believe that they made a mistake by electing a government controlled by Hamas. When aid from the West was cut off because their government would not recognize Israel, the oil-rich Arab countries failed to come to the rescue. Once again, we are cautiously optimistic that they have learned a lesson, and will be more willing to negotiate with Hamas.

Meanwhile, the Israelis are tired of war, which is why they elected Olmert to be prime minister after Sharon’s strokes. He should be a willing participant in the comprehensive peace negotiations we hope will occur next year.

The criterion Friday, December 22, 2006

The article “Rule of St. Benedict helps strengthen family life” by Delores Luckey in the Nov. 24 issue of The Criterion was most interesting. She did well in showing how the Rule of St. Benedict can work for families.

The Rule helps offer a wonderful life guide for living the Christian life and growing deeper in relationship with God.

I liked the practical way she explained applying St. Benedict’s Rule to family life and our personal lives. Thank you for printing this article.

Whenever we speak of the importance of the Rule of St. Benedict in the lives of monks and all Christians, especially in family life, we usually speak of it as providing a “way of life” for those who have chosen to follow Christ. St. Benedict sets us on our journey with the Gospel as our guide so we can claim that our “way of life” is one that is based on Gospel values.

The Rule, then, applies the teachings of Christ to the daily life of the Christian, whether in community or family, in such a way that our life is shaped by its teachings.

Growing within the world, and especially in the United States, is the Benedictine Oblate movement. Oblates are Christian men and women, many living in family life, who yearn for a spiritual life deeply rooted in God and may be affiliated with either a men’s or women’s Benedictine monastic community. They strive to live the spirit of the Rule of St. Benedict in response to this yearning.

At Saint Meinrad Archabbey in St. Meinrad, more than 1,000 Oblates participate in our Oblate program. They feel very comfortable in applying the Rule of St. Benedict both to their personal spiritual lives and their family lives. There are common threads among these Oblates that include moderation, balance, stability, mutuality, prayer, work, and simplicity.

The Rule says for Oblates, no less than for monks, “that all are to be welcomed as Christ,” but for Oblates this is felt to come from their own place in the world and within their families, and to the best of their ability as their state in life permits.

Within the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, St. Meinrad Archabbey has five chapters and one group of Benedictine Oblates:

• Saint Meinrad—Archabbeight Guest House (chapter founded in the 1930s).
• Tell City—St. Paul Parish Hall (chapter founded in 1940).
• Indianapolis—Holy Peace Parish Center (chapter founded in the 1940s).
• Madison—Prince of Peace Parish Center (chapter founded in the late 1940s).
• Shelbyville—St. Vincent de Paul Parish, Shelby County (group founded in 1995).

The mission of these chapters is to help the Oblates to support one another and to apply their spiritual life through prayer, liturgical celebration, instruction and fellowship in Christ, so “that in all things God may be glorified” (Rule of St. Benedict 57.9).

You may write to Saint Meinrad Archabbey for information about the Oblate Program.

(Benedictine Father Christiansen Brune is director of the Office of Benedictine Oblates at Saint Meinrad Archabbey.)

Letters to the Editor

During this Christmas season, take time to count your blessings

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth! Let us give glory to our God even when we question why things happen. Even when one of the ones we love, whether that person has yet to be born or lived to a ripe old age, we must have faith in God’s plan. We must always believe that there is a good thing comes from God. Without him, we are nothing.

We must believe that everything that happens to us is for our own good, even if we don’t understand. Someday, we will understand. He will reveal it to us at the right time, and only the known when the right time is.

This is where faith comes in. If we have both the size of mustard seeds, we can move mountains. We can move the mountains of doubt, the mountains of disbelief, the mountains of disappointment, the mountains of unforbearing, the mountains of stubbornness. There are many mountains in our backyards that we would like moved. And we can move these mountains if we have faith. But we must be persistent in prayer. Remember back long it took St. Monica to have her “mountain” moved.

So, during this Christmas season, while we’re at the baby Jesus, let’s all count our blessings, both large and small. We all have many blessings if we stop and think about it. Oftentimes, we give credit to our own abilities, our own intelligence or just plain luck. But every good thing comes from God. Without him, we are nothing.

And, when we lose a loved one, let us say as good. “Do not weep because he [or she] died, but rejoice because he [or she] lived.”

Let us all count our blessings, both large and small. We all have many blessings if we stop and think about it. Oftentimes, we give credit to our own abilities, our own intelligence or just plain luck. But every good thing comes from God. Without him, we are nothing.

Letters Policy

Letters from readers are published in The Criterion as part of the newspaper’s commitment to “the responsible and freely-held and expressed opinion among the People of God” (Comunippo et Progressio, 116). The editors reserve the right to select the letters that will be published and to edit letters from readers as necessary based on space limitations, pastoral sensitivity and content (including spelling and grammar). In order to encourage opinions from a variety of readers, frequent writers will be limited to two letters in any six-month period. Concise letters (usually less than 300 words) are more likely to be printed.

Letters must be signed, but for serious reasons, names may be withheld. Send letters to “Letters to the Editor,” The Criterion, P.O. Box 1717, Indianapolis, IN 46206-1717. Readers with access to e-mail may send letters to criterion@archindy.org.
Permitámosle el amor humano sea nuestro regalo de Navidad para Jesús.
December 22

December 23

January 4
Our Lady of Fatima Retreat House, 5353 E. 56th St., Indianapolis. “7-9 p.m. Information: 812-379-9353, ext. 333.

January 5

January 6-12
Benedictine Peace Retreat and Conference Center, 1402 Southern Ave., Beecher Grove. “School of Peace.” Benedictine Sister Mary Margaret Funk, presenter. Information: 317-788-7751 or benediction@cmsc.net.

January 7

January 12-14

January 15
Oldenburg Franciscan Center, Oldenburg. “Living to God In Our Dreams: Experiencing the God Within.” Father Jonathan Meyer, presenter. Information: 812-933-6437 or e-mail center@oldenburgpdf.com.

January 16
Oldenburg Franciscan Center, Oldenburg. Day of Reflection. Information: 812-933-6437 or e-mail center@oldenburgpdf.com.

January 16-18

January 27-31
Our Lady of Fatima Retreat House, 5353 E. 56th St., Indianapolis. “Pre-Cana Conference” for engaged couples, 1:45-6 p.m. Information: 317-545-7681, 317-236-1596 or 800-382-9836, ext. 1396.

February 1

February 2-4

February 9-11

February 11
Our Lady of Fatima Retreat House, 5353 E. 56th St., Indianapolis. “Lent 101.” Benedictine Father Vincent Tobin, presenter. Information: 812-357-6611 or e-mail mazzeller@samirondol.pdf.

February 21
Sanctuary of Guadalupe, 416 E. 14th St., Indianapolis. “Praying with Scripture: Lectio Divina.” Benedictine Sister Maria Tasto, presenter. Information: 812-367-2777, 808-880-2777 or kordes@kesdale.org.


February 22
St. Bartholomew Parish, 5535 E. 56th St., Indianapolis. “A Twelfth Night Gathering.” Epiphany celebration, 9 p.m., Newman dining room, meal, 57 per person, reservations due Jan. 3, burning of the greens ceremony, 6:30 p.m. Information: 800-682-0987 or www.saintcinclid.org.

February 27-March 1
Saint Meinrad Archabbey, 200 Hill Drive, Saint Meinrad. Mid-week retreat. “Peace, the Benedictine Way.” Benedictine Father Eric Lies, presenter. Information: 812-357-6611 or e-mail mazzeller@samirondol.pdf.

March 1

March 24

March 27-30
Saint Meinrad Archabbey, 100 Hill Drive, Saint Meinrad. “What is God’s Dream for You?” Mathew Kelly, presenter, $300 per person. Information: 317-545-7681 or e-mail www.archindy.org/fatima.
Inactive Catholics are welcomed home in New Albany Deanery

By Angela Hayes

NEW ALBANY—“I saw the sign!” “That is what most inactive Catholics say when I ask them, ‘How did you find out about the program?’” said Tony Ammer, a member of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany.

Ammer is a team member and one of two people who fields calls about the Catholics Returning Home (CRH) program offered at the parish.

The sign referred to is one of many yard signs and banners placed throughout the 19 parishes within the New Albany Deanery to advertise the program.

Catholics Returning Home, in its third year in the deanery, is a program offered to help non-practicing Catholics return to the practice of their faith.

“We strive to be welcoming, compassionate and nonjudgmental. It sometimes takes all of the courage a returnee can muster up just to walk through the doors,” said Ann Marie Camarata (our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish).

“We strive to be welcoming, compassionate and nonjudgmental. It sometimes takes all of the courage a returnee can muster up just to walk through the doors.”
—Ann Marie Camarata

Camarata said, “We try to receive them with open arms and open hearts.”

The returnees are given an opportunity to share their stories as well as their hopes and expectations in a confidential and accepting environment.

During the sessions, a brief update of the Church since Vatican II is given along with an explanation of the Mass, reconciliation and the Nicene Creed. There are no strings attached with this program.

The team encourages, directs and facilitates in any way possible. This includes encouraging participants to talk to one of the many pastors in the New Albany Deanery.

At the end of each six-week session, the participants are asked if they would be interested in becoming members of the team for future sessions. New team members provide insight and new energy to the program.

Harold Beebe, another CRH team member, said, “One of the big advantages of this program is that it requires only limited direct involvement of the pastor. Father Paul Etienne, the pastor here at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish, supports our program and the team, and is available any time, if needed.”

“However,” he said, “Father Etienne does not attend team meetings nor is he involved in the planning of each session.”

Beebe said, “He visits the program once during each six-week session, welcoming the participants and inviting them to call if they need him for any reason.”

The Catholics Returning Home program has been approved by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. It was developed by Sally Mews, a former inactive Catholic who saw a need for a program welcoming non-practicing Catholics with the success of the program.

“We are very pleased with the success of the program,” said Tony Aemmer, a member of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany.

Although the program is held at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish, all the New Albany Deanery parishes cooperate in any way possible. This includes encouraging participants to talk to one of the many pastors in the parish-based program.

It’s “cheap, easy and it works,” Mews said.


Program leaders have already begun preparations by making team assignments, praying for the participants and clearing their calendars for six consecutive Monday nights from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.

The signs are up again at each of the New Albany Deanery parishes along with brochures, flyers and bulletin announcements.

Although the program is held at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish, all the New Albany Deanery parishes cooperate with advertising and promotion.

For more information, see the Web page www.crbhome.org or call 812-945-3112.

(Angela Hayes is a member of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany and the Catholics Returning Home team.)
Leader: This Fourth Week of Advent, the reading from the Hebrew Bible reminds us how the birth of the Savior was foretold generations before. The Jewish people waited many, many centuries for a savior. And St. Paul won’t let us forget the reason for Christmas—that Jesus was born so that he could die and atone for our sins. The familiar story of Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth should make us reflect on how both those women put their trust in God to give birth to sons. Have we that kind of faith?

Closing prayer

(Leader may read all or others in the household may each read a segment.)

1. Father in heaven, help us learn to be patient. We ask for the needs and will satisfy them in your time.

2. God above, as you found favor in the Virgin Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth, help us live so that you find favor in our lives. Give us the courage to accept your will.

(3.) Along with Mary, help us too to say “yes, God.” Do with me as you want. Make me your hands on Earth.

(4.) Holy Spirit, inspire us to live every day as if Christmas is just a day away. 

Doubleday acquires rights to Pope Benedict’s first book as pontiff

NEW YORK (CNS)—Doubleday has acquired rights to publish the first book Pope Benedict XVI has written as the Holy Father.

Bill Barry, vice president and publisher of the company’s religious publishing division, made the announcement on Dec. 12 in New York.

The book, titled Jesus of Nazareth: From His Baptism to His Transfiguration, is written for the general reader. It will be published next spring.

The announcement said Doubleday acquired world English, first serial, audio and exclusive Spanish-language rights in North America from the Italian publisher Rizzoli, which licensed international rights to the book at the request of Libreria Editrice Vaticana, the Vatican publishing house.

“Heavy previous published works by Popes John XXIII and John Paul II,” said Barry, “are especially honored by the Holy Father’s confidence in Doubleday in entrusting to us the English-language publication of his book.

He said Pope Benedict’s “scores of books written as the theologian [Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger demonstrate his Holiness’] erudition. “But the appeal of this work will be in the personal passion he means to share about the intimate friendship with Jesus as the central figure of Christianity. It is truly a gift for all believers and sure to be an instant spiritual classic,” Barry added.

Jesus of Nazareth represents the culmination of Pope Benedict’s lifelong quest to defend historical Christianity in the modern world. It is, he writes in the book’s preface, the result of a “long interior journey” and “an expression of [my] personal search for the face of the Lord.”

The now 79-year-old pope began his work on the book in the summer of 2003 and because, as he explains, “I don’t know how much time and how much strength I will still be given. I have decided to publish the first 10 chapters [from Jesus’ baptism to transfiguration] as Volume One.”

In the book, Pope Benedict paints a vivid portrait of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels, and says that “only if something extraordinary happened, if the figure and words of Jesus radically exceeded all the hopes and expectations of his age, can his crucifixion and his effectiveness be explained.”

Doubleday is a division of Random House Inc., whose parent company is Bertelsmann A.G.
Maranatha!

May the fragile gift of peace,
one hummed like a melody
into your spirit
as you were birthed and held
in the tenderness of God,
sing anew in your heart.
May the passion for peace
weave its refrain within you
until your feet fairly dance
to new rhythms
of reconciliation.

Maranatha!

Come, O Christ, our Peace!

By Sister Barbara Leonhard, O.S.F.
Hello. My name is Gabriel. I am an archangel, a title that means chief messenger, and I’ve been privileged to be the messenger of God himself. As an angel, I am a pure spirit and one of the nine orders of the celestial hierarchy: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and angels.

I’m not the only archangel. Christian and Jewish writings identify seven of us, of whom Michael, Raphael, and I are the most prominent. But there are also Uriel, Chamuel, Zophiel, and Zadkiel. I could tell you more about each of them, but that’s not my purpose today. I want to tell you about something far more important.

We who enjoy eternity in heaven don’t have time as you do on earth, but it’s hard to explain what happened without referring to time. So let’s say that one day God gave me an assignment. He told me that he had decided that the time had arrived for him to accomplish the redemption of humanity on earth. He said that he planned to send his Son, whom we angels constantly adore as the Second Person of the Trinity, to earth as a mere human, and he would redeem humanity.

He didn’t tell me how he’d do that. That wasn’t important for my assignment. Why, God told me, my first thought was, “Wow! Talk about humbling yourself!” God himself is going to become a human being with all those limitations.”

Of course, I didn’t know the half of it.

As you know now, he not only became a human, but he died a most cruel death—by crucifixion. But now I’m getting way ahead of myself.

In putting his plan into motion, God said, “I’ve given you two assignments for me. First, I was to appear to a man named Zechariah, a Jewish priest who lived in Jerusalem. I went to see Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. God had decided that they were to be the parents of a man who would prepare the way for the Son and would prepare the way for him. My second assignment was to tell a young woman named Mary that she was to become God’s mother.

Unfortunately, things didn’t go too well on my first mission. I went to see Zechariah while he was burning incense in the Temple in Jerusalem. As I said, he was a priest. He was a member of one of the 24 divisions of priests for who, for a week, at a time, a year, served in the Jerusalem Temple. I’m not going into all the details of the argument I had with him when I appeared to him. When I sensed his fear, I said what we angels have always said to try to reason with the because of a heavenly vision: “Do not be afraid.”

Then, as I had been instructed, I told him that he and his wife’s prayers for a child had been heard, that Elizabeth would bear a son, and that they should call him John—a name that means “Yahweh has shown favor” to indicate that he would play a role in salvation history. Before he had a chance to say anything, I continued to tell him that John was to be consecrated by a Nazirite vow and set apart for the Lord’s service as were Samson and Samuel. Therefore, he was to be neither to drink wine or strong drink. I further said that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb, thus born without the stain of original sin. I said that he would have the power of Elijah the prophet and would use this power to prepare a people fit for the Lord.

Well, Zechariah didn’t seem to believe me. He replied that he was an old man and that Elizabeth was also advanced in years. So I got a bit forceful. “I am Gabriel, who stands before God,” I told him. “I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. But now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time.”

He was indeed mute from then until John’s birth. Things went much better, thank God, when I appeared to Mary six months later in the village of Nazareth in Galilee. She was betrothed to Joseph at the time. I appeared to her much as I had done to Zechariah and began my greeting. “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.” She, too, was troubled by my appearance, so I also told her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.”

Before she could speak, I continued, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High [God], and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Unlike Zechariah, Mary didn’t doubt what I said, and I know full well that she understood what I was telling her. She was well aware of the Jewish prophecies of a Savior who would be born of the house of David. She did have some questions, though, mainly how this could happen because she planned to remain a virgin. So, as God had explained it to me, I told her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her so the child would be conceived through the power of God. “Therefore,” I said, “the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.”

I also told her about Elizabeth’s pregnancy despite her old age, and couldn’t resist adding: “For nothing is impossible for God.”

Mary believed me immediately and as quickly replied, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”

She had always considered herself God’s servant and, if this was what God wanted of her, she was eager to obey. The evangelist Luke reported all this in the Gospel he wrote. But the evangelist Matthew also wrote about the involvement of an angel in the birth of the Son as a human. This time the angel appeared in dreams to Joseph three times. Matthew didn’t give the name of the angel, but I think you can figure that out for yourself.

The first time happened after Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant and knew that he was not the father. He was trying to decide what to do about it when the angel appeared in a dream to let him know that Mary had not had sexual relations with another man, but that the child had been conceived through the Holy Spirit. The second time was when King Herod was about to send soldiers to kill all the babies in Bethlehem after he learned from the Magi that a king had been born there. The angel warned Joseph and told him to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

Then, after Herod’s death, the angel again appeared in a dream to tell Joseph that it was safe to return. We angels were also involved after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This time we were sent to announce the good news to lowly shepherds. We startled them while they were tending their sheep at night, so again we had to tell them, “Do not be afraid.”

After telling them that a Savior had been born who was Messiah and Lord, we all sang, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

Well, that was my involvement in the great mystery of the Incarnation. As the evangelist John wrote, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” He emphasized that the Word was God who existed from all eternity and that “all things came to be through him.” But then, without losing his divinity, he took on human nature.

Of course, the Incarnation was only the beginning of your humans’ redemption. But the Incarnation made the redemption possible. I feel privileged that God asked me to play my small role in the birth of Jesus.

(John F. Fink is editor emeritus of The Criterion.)
God's love made visible during birth of grandson on Christmas

By Jim Welter
Special to The Criterion

The Scripture readings for the Christmas season speak to us of those who waited and longed for the birth of a child.

The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah, who were “advanced in age,” comes to mind as does the story of Simon and Anna, who spent years in the temple waiting and praying for the birth of Mary’s child.

My wife and I walked that Advent journey in a very special way last year as we waited and longed for the birth of our first grandchild.

And what a special joy it was to finally welcome Calvin Joseph Welter into the world at 11:49 p.m. on Christmas Day.

As we surrounded the hospital bed to get our first glimpse of Calvin Joseph, emotions poured forth: “Welcome to our world, Calvin!” “We’ve been waiting for you, little guy! We love you.” “Don’t be afraid, we’ll take care of you!”

That night, the words of Advent seemed to be written just for us: “A child shall lead them.”

Isaiah 11:6

A Child is born to us—God’s love made visible.

This memory is an excerpt from his new book titled Come Next Spring … Scripture Reflections of Hope and Promise, which is available from the publisher at www.AscendImagery.com.

Holy Family

This sculpture of the Holy Family, created by master sculptor Timothy P. Schmalz of Toronto, Canada, was dedicated by Father Michael Welch, pastor of St. Christopher Parish in Indianapolis, on Dec. 2 at the northwest corner of the parish property at 5301 W. 16th St. near Biltmore Avenue on the west side.

Soldier is grateful to attend Christmas Mass during war

By Paul Buckler
Special to The Criterion

On Christmas Day in 1944, in the midst of World War II, I asked my commanding officer if I could go to church. We were encamped near a small village in France. He surprised me and said yes even though there was heavy patrolling on both sides of the combat zone.

I went with two other soldiers into the village. We carried our rifles on our shoulders.

About one-fourth of the top of the church was shelled out. It was snowing fairly hard right down through the opening.

The church was full of French civilians and American soldiers.

I was very thankful to be able to celebrate Christmas 1944 at that church in France, and will never forget that Mass.

(Paul Buckler is a member of St. Mary Parish in Richmond.)

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My Dad was a rural mail carrier out of the small community of St. Paul, Ind. Charlie knew all his patrons, and shared their joys and sorrows as he delivered their daily mail. In the summer months, he would often find a present of fresh vegetables in a mailbox, and in the winter months there would be gifts of baked goods or canned food items as a way to show appreciation for the caring man who was always at their service.

As Christmas 1937 neared, the economy was poor as the nation struggled to recover from the Great Depression that began in 1929. As Charlie drove up to a rural mailbox, Mrs. Smith was waiting for him. “Charlie, did anything come for us from Sears Roebuck?” she asked. “I ordered a doll for my little girl for Christmas.” “Not today, Mrs. Smith,” he said, kindly. “Maybe tomorrow. I’ll watch for it.” Each day, Charlie had to tell her, “Not today, Mrs. Smith.” He could see the disappointment in her eyes and it really bothered him.

On Christmas Eve, the doll had not arrived. When Charlie finished his route and returned to the Post Office, he shared the story with Elie Avery, the aging postal clerk. She smiled broadly and said, “Charlie, I may have a solution for your problem.” “What can we do?” Charlie asked. “The stores are closing. It’s too late to find a doll for her.” “Not so, Charlie,” Miss Avery said with vigor in her voice and twinkling eyes. “I’ve got a doll that I had as a child. It has a porcelain head, hands and feet. The doll is still in great shape. I’ll get it and its extra clothes, and wrap it in tissue if you will deliver it.” Dad immediately agreed. Late that Christmas Eve, we delivered the beautiful doll and its wardrobe. Knowing the little girl would awake to Santa’s gift made us very happy. The memory of that Christmas Eve is as fresh in my mind as if it were yesterday.

(Robert McAuliffe is a member of St. Mary Parish in Greensburg.)
Helping men with disabilities made Christmas 2005 special

By Amy Duncan

Special to The Criterion

Our son, Carl, was born two months prematurely on Christmas morning in 1982. Nothing will ever top that Christmas, but last year came close.

Due to his premature birth, Carl developed cerebral palsy and is mildly mentally disabled. He always lived with us until the summer of 2005.

In July of last year, he moved into a brand new group home that opened in our area. For the first few months, Carl and Joe were the only residents of the home.

That changed when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005. Forty group homes owned by the company that operates the Gulf Coast in August 2005. Forty group homes owned by the company that operates the Gulf Coast in August 2005. Forty group homes owned by the company that operates the Gulf Coast in August 2005.

Four men moved in within days of the hurricane. Greg was sickly. Mike was always cold, was a big NASCAR fan. His driveway to direct them to the house. He went upstairs after eating and the next night.

As Christmas approached, Carl’s Dad and I knew that the holidays wouldn’t be the same without Carl in our home. We needed something to help the “empty nest” feeling we were experiencing so we decided to “adopt” the men living in Carl’s home for Christmas.

My husband, Carl and I shopped for gifts for the men. Our friends, Micki and Roger, wanted to help, too. Besides shopping for the men, Roger agreed to play Santa. I had the Santa suit and Roger provided Santa’s sleigh bells.

Before Santa arrived, we told Roger how to identify each of the men in Carl’s home. Santa called each man by name as he gave him a gift.

All the men received the basics—T-shirts and socks—and there was a special gift for each man. Joe, who likes cartoons, received some new DVDs. Greg and Mike received some much-needed new shirts. Eugene, who was always cold, was a big NASCAR fan. His special gift from Santa was a fleece blanket with a race car design. Brien’s special gift was supposed to be some black sweatpants but, judging from the look on his face, I know his special gift was the bag of socks he was given!

I don’t think any of us will ever forget the expressions on those men’s faces that night.

Greg returned to Louisiana on the day after Christmas. Mike, Eugene and Brien returned there shortly after the first of the year.

Christmas 2005 was different at our house. Yes, our “nest” was empty, but it sure was full at Carl’s home.

(Amy Duncan is a member of Holy Family Parish in New Albany.)

Mother of 13 children copes with her husband’s death at Christmas

By Martha Welch Mendez

Special to The Criterion

This is not my story but my mother’s. It was December 23, and a busy day for a 40-year-old stay-at-home mother of 12 children with one child sick in bed.

It was December 23, and a busy day for a 40-year-old stay-at-home mother of 12 children with one child sick in bed. for the men. Our friends, Micki and Roger, wanted to help, too. Besides shopping for the men, Roger agreed to play Santa. I had the Santa suit and Roger provided Santa’s sleigh bells.

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Greg returned to Louisiana on the day after Christmas. Mike, Eugene and Brien returned there shortly after the first of the year.

We just celebrated Mom’s 82nd birthday with her at the nursing home where she lives.

I just wanted to say a heartfelt thank you to Mom from all us kids for the love and support we have had through the years.

(Martha Welch Mendez is a member of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Indianapolis.)
Nativity play of 1972 was special surprise performance for parents

By Kathleen Mitchel
Special to The Criterion

I am the second oldest of eight children—five girls and three boys, in that order, with 10 years separating the oldest from the youngest. The Christmas of 1972 had Cindy, Lori, Jill, Jennifer, Andrew, Michael, Samuel and me rehearsing our live performance of the Nativity. We seemed to be pretty professional. At least in our eyes, we were. We practiced and practiced until our rendition of the Bible story was perfect. So it happened on one cold December night just days before Christmas Eve. The stage was set and the tree was adorned in white lights that filled the living room with a halo-like glow.

My brothers and sisters and I were costumed in our bath robes, and we had replicates the authentic look. There we stood around the Christmas tree—Mary, Joseph, an angel, two shepherds and the Three Wise Men, just waiting for the curtain to open. It was now time to get Mom and Dad so they could behold the greatest production of the Nativity story ever performed in a house on a country road in Carmel, Ind.

The story was told and acted out while songs of joy filled the room. A sense of peace fell upon us all. The anticipation of the birth of Our Savior was felt that night and every Christmas since.

That play was our gift to our parents, Steve and Rosalind Mitchel. It was a secret just between us kids, and we kept it until the start of our big show.

(Kathleen Mitchel is a member of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Parish in Indianapolis.) ♦

God’s gift of another year of life is best present of all for cancer patient

By Jean Allen
Special to The Criterion

I have many Christmas memories and they are all precious to me. But the most recent memory is from December 2005. Last year, I was diagnosed with cancer. I started chemotherapy and radiation therapy in October and finished the treatments in December. Then, in January, I was scheduled to have surgery. But December 2005 was a good and happy Christmas. Just being able to spend it with my family was a miracle for me because I did not know if I would be here or not next Christmas.

God has been good to me, and that goes to show that you should not take your health or your life for granted. Thanks to God for letting me share another Christmas with my family this year!

(Jean Allen is a member of St. Joseph Parish in Corydon.) ♦

Surprise visit from Santa Claus reminds girl to count her blessings

By Mary Williams
Special to The Criterion

It was a cold, snowy Christmas Eve in 1959. We had “painted” Christmas scenes on the picture window in the living room with stencils and Glass Wax. The snow was falling and it looked like a Norman Rockwell scene outside. As we children were peering out the window contemplating Santa’s arrival, we heard a loud “Ho, Ho, Ho” outside. Seven pairs of eyes grew huge when we saw Santa walking down the middle of our street. The younger siblings were stunned. Here came Santa walking up our driveway straight to the front door! We lunged for the door, opened it and were just about speechless as Santa handed each of us a present. Then he warned us to get to bed because he was ready to start making deliveries.

We scrambled over our feet to get to our rooms and fall asleep. As I lay there thinking about what just had occurred, I remember feeling all warm and cozy about being in a family that loved each other, sharing a room with my sister, smelling the turkey starting to bake down in the kitchen and knowing that the manger scene was tucked nicely under the tree where Santa could see it.

I knew that our family was truly blessed.

(Mary Williams is a member of Holy Spirit Parish in Indianapolis.) ♦
A story for Christmas: Bringing home the house of bread

By Fr. Stanley J. Konieczny

It felt good to wake up at home in her own bed, far from the roundness of the college dormitory.

“Everything is the same,” Patricia thought as she padded down to the kitchen where Mom was baking and assembling her annual gingerbread house.

Maureen’s gingerbread houses were legendary not so much for their sleek design and lavish decorations, but for the architectural disasters of falling chimneys and melting candy mortar. She was busy at work on this year’s creation when Patricia crept behind her and gave her a hug.

“Morning, Mom. I see you’re hard at work,” Patricia said.

Maureen thought a moment then answered, “Remember how the Magi came to the Christ Child and brought collets brimming with gold, frankincense and myrrh? Well, myrrh and frankincense were very aromatic, just like baked ginger and nutmeg and cinnamon.

“When I smell those spices in my kitchen at Christmas, it conjures up visions of visitors from the East riding camels laden with fragrant gifts. And, who knows? Out of thoughtfulness, the Wise Men may have presented Mary with a small bunch of cinnamon sticks or a pouch of ginger as a gift for the new mother!” Patricia announced as she snatched one from the landscaping around the little brown cottage with the precarious tilt.

“As you know, Mom, the most touching line in the Christmas story is that there was no room for the family at the inn,” she said. “Maybe it’s a bit silly, but I feel I can make up for that lack of hospitality in some way by building my own little house just for Jesus.”

Patricia recalled Jesus saying that he would never have a place to lay his head.

“My gingerbread houses may be a bit ramshackle, but they make you think,” Maureen chuckled. The master baker paused, walked over to the counter, poured two mugs of tea and announced, “It’s break time!”

As they savored the warmth of the tea and the kitchen, Patricia observed that the house smelled like Christmas.

“It comes with baking gingerbread. The whole house smells fresh and spicy, and that’s straight out of the Christmas story, too,” Maureen said.

“How so?” Patricia asked with a perplexed look.

Maureen thought a moment then answered, “Remember how the Magi came to the Christ Child and brought collets brimming with gold, frankincense and myrrh? When I smell those spices in my kitchen at Christmas, it conjures up visions of visitors from the East riding camels laden with fragrant gifts. And, who knows? Out of thoughtfulness, the Wise Men may have presented Mary with a small bunch of cinnamon sticks or a pouch of ginger as a gift for the new mother!”

“I like the gumdrops,” Patricia announced as she swiped another gumdrop.

“Just as Patricia swiped another gumdrop, the graham cracker roof began to shift and slide off the gingerbread walls.

“Maybe it’s a bit silly, but I feel I can make up for that lack of hospitality in some way by building my own little house just for Jesus,” Patricia explained. “Jesus was born in the House of Bread, so it is full of construction faults.

“Bethlehem means ‘House of Bread,’ ” Maureen explained. “And for me, the most touching line in the Christmas story is that there was no room for the family at the inn,” she said. “Maybe it’s a bit silly, but I feel I can make up for that lack of hospitality in some way by building my own little house just for Jesus.”

During this season of Christmas, may His message of peace and love abide in your heart and home.

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Presider: Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein, O.S.B.

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The Catholic Center lot (enter from West 14th Street)
By Moises Sandoval
Catholic News Service

The woman’s voice on the telephone was desperate. She and her husband and their three children were going to be evicted from their apartment on the day before Christmas because they had exhausted their unemployment benefits and public assistance. Saying that they had nowhere to turn, she pleaded for my help. At the time, I was working as a reporter for The Albuquerque Tribune, and I suppose she picked my name out of the bylines in the paper simply because I am Hispanic.

Touched by her desperation, I went to visit the family in the threadbare little apartment where they lived. Their plight touched my heart. I could not see them being evicted from their apartment on the day before Christmas. Saying that they had nowhere to turn, she pleaded for my help. I told my colleagues, and they also were touched by the family’s plight. They took up a collection. Several days before Christmas, I took the $100 to the family, accompanied by several reporters with boxes of groceries so that the family would have both food and shelter on Christmas Day.

Memories of countless other Christmases have blurred, but this one remains sharply etched. We were not much better off than the family we helped. Our celebration was rather simple, but we never regretted having responded to that cry for help. For us, the important thing was that, on that day so long ago when the angels sang “Glory to God in the highest and peace to the people on earth,” that married couple and their children could sense a little of the wonder and joy of the birth that changed the course of history. Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes writes that in the Hispanic world the family is “the security net” in times of trouble.

“And when have the times not been troubled?” he asks. But it sometimes takes time, as in this case, for a family to rearrange furniture and make room by their hearth for family members who have ventured from their traditional community into the crueler world of urban America, but failed to earn enough money to pay for their food and shelter. (Moises Sandoval is proprietor of Moises Sandoval Communications, specializing in bilingual editing.)
Mystery of Christmas is truly about Lord’s presence all year

By Fr. Herbert Weber

Christ was born during a time and in a place of uncertainty and tumult. It is precisely in that context that his birth can be understood best.

Just as Jesus was born in a nation that was oppressed and into a people who felt helpless, observing the anniversary of his birth still brings hope to those who feel overwhelmed.

It would be easy to approach Christmas without wars or terrorism, without divided families or people grieving someone’s death. Nonetheless, those situations should make the significance of Christ’s coming all the more important.

Christmas is not merely a time to recall that Jesus was born more than 2,000 years ago. People today continue to encounter the Lord as they face daily struggles. Often, Jesus is found in the midst of pain and difficulty.

One year, I was called to the hospital on Christmas Eve. I ran into a parishioner there, who told me that she is a volunteer and always comes to the hospital on Christmas Eve to make sure that everyone has a visitor. I suddenly felt blessed being able to be with one patient who needed my presence.

Another time I recall telling my family that I would be late for Christmas dinner because several parishioners were going with me to the county jail to celebrate Mass with some inmates.

With Larry playing his guitar and Joe assisting in the singing, the men in the jail started to cry in joy. The Mass was moving, and I knew that Jesus was fully present there.

What Christmas allows is an opportunity to see Christ living on this Earth, a mystery that continues to unfold throughout the year.

The Incarnation means that God is joined to humanity and has entered into the good and bad of human experience. A nurse told me that she comes to church each week not to escape the world, but to find a way to bring Christ into the world.

In her work, at the maternity wing of a hospital, she often sees parents rejoicing at the birth of their long-awaited children. Sadly, she also sees parents grieving about the birth of stillborn babies and premature infants who are at great risk. She reminds herself that Christ is present, and shares her conviction with parents during happy and sorrowful times.

Christ has entered the world and continues to share people’s lives. One woman in Haiti has a house for children with profound physical and mental disabilities. Many children have been abandoned.

One little boy, David, was brought to her after he was found lying in a pile of trash. No one knows his age or even his name. He is physically very limited and usually lies on a little mat.

As I held David, I found that I could get a little response from him as I rubbed his stomach—a slight smile that was an expression of the kindness he felt there.

I celebrated Mass in the yard, and having the children there for the Eucharist was a statement of solidarity. The Lord was present in their home sacramentally, and in the love and goodness of their caregivers.

The mystery of Christmas is truly about the Lord’s presence throughout the year and in every part of the world. Through Jesus’ birth, hope and joy are brought to each person in daily life.

The Lord was present in their home sacramentally, and in the love and goodness of their caregivers. The mystery of Christmas is truly about the Lord’s presence throughout the year and in every part of the world. Through Jesus’ birth, hope and joy are brought to each person in daily life.

Names for the Magi do not appear until the sixth century and all are fictional. “Balthasar” may be a corruption of Belshazzar, a Babylonian king in the Book of Daniel. “Melchior” may be a combination of two Hebrew words for “king” and “light.” And “Caspar” may derive from the name of an Indian king converted by early Christians.

These names first appear in the West in a sixth-century mosaic in the Church of St. Apollinarius Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy.

The date for Christmas may have been settled by the fourth century, but legends of the Magi grew throughout the Middle Ages.

By Joseph Kelly

The Gospel accounts of the Nativity in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 do not say what day Jesus was born.

There were attempts to calculate the day, but the third century Christians realized this was impossible so they tried other ways to determine a date for Jesus’ birth.

Many people believed the world was re-created on the first day of spring, which is March 25 of the Julian calendar followed in ancient Rome.

How appropriate, then, for the world’s Redeemer to become incarnate on that day.

Other scholars argued that Jesus became incarnate, not at his birth but at his conception. If Jesus was conceived on March 25, he would have been born nine months later on Dec. 25.

This date didn’t catch on immediately, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean region where people believed that Jesus was born on Jan. 6.

But in the West, Dec. 25 had much appeal. Why?

Many Romans venerated the Sun, whose birthday was Dec. 25, or a virility god named Mithra with the same birthday. The Romans also observed a raucous celebration called Saturnalia on Dec. 17-23.

Thus, Dec. 25 offered a date with a good theological basis that also would counter several pagan holidays.

Although we don’t know the final steps, in 336 the Church at Rome officially observed the “birthday of Christ” on Dec. 25. This tradition spread throughout the world.

But what about Jan. 6?

The Church decided to use that day for Jesus’ manifestation to the whole world, symbolized by the Magi.

The Magi were three kings named Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar, right? Not really.

Matthew’s Gospel speaks only of Magi and doesn’t call them kings or say they rode camels or give their names.

The early Christians looked to the Old Testament for prophecies relating to Jesus.

One prophecy in Isaiah said that foreigners traveling on camels would bring gold and frankincense to the Messiah, while a psalm spoke of kings coming.

Naturally, the Christians interpreted the Messiah as Jesus, and the only foreigners who brought him gifts were the Magi. By the third century, we find Christians speaking of the Magi as kings riding camels.

How many Magi were there?

A great Egyptian scholar named Origen found a Genesis passage in which three pagans honored the Hebrew patriarch Isaac. Origen said the three symbolized the Magi, but didn’t say why.

Families celebrate Christmas traditions

This Week’s Question

Describe a unique or continuing family Christmas tradition in your home.

“Our three children usually go to a CCD Advent program. At home, I have a wonderful storybook set and Advent calendar that my mother gave me in 1995. Each little book gives a Scripture reference, and we go to the library and look up the references and take the journey in the word in anticipation of Christmas.” (Kim Parra, Albuquerque, N.M.)

“We make a homemade Jesse Tree. We cut a pine branch and weave a wreath around it. We have little kids—1, 5 and 2—so we cut out fold-up tickets for each day, and my wife draws a symbol on each one and we read that story.” (Jay Reszka, Bennett, Col.)

“When our kids were younger, we always had a birthday cake for Jesus, at home, on Christmas Day. Our Jesse Tree has always been made from a dead branch from the woods, so it is a tree. Reading the Scripture verses every day is a neat way to make Advent very meaningful.” (Mary Glenn, Denison, Iowa)

Lend Us Your Voice

An upcoming edition asks: How have you changed as a parent? Why did you change?

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From the Editor Emeritus/John E. Fink

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession

(Eleventh in a series)

Considering all that God has done for us, we should be expressing our gratitude constantly. The practice of prayer is the key to this gratitude. The practice of prayer of thanksgiving, of course, is the eucharistia, the word itself means thanksgiving, from the noun eucharis, gratitude. During the celebration of the Eucharist, we are supposed to reserve after the reception of Communion for a period of time before thanksgiving after Communion.

We learned to make this thanksgiving before we received our first Communion, it but seems to me that this period of silence is frequently skipped over in many Masses today. We just want to get on with our hectic lives, and if a priest sits too long for meditation after the Communion hymn is over, I can feel people thinking, “Come on, Father, get on with it.”

If we find a priest who doesn’t bow to this pressure, that more than ever, we should thank God for in our prayer of thanksgiving.

Being thankful for God’s intercession are nothing more than prayers of petition except that, instead of praying for something for yourself or someone else, you pray for something else. There is no limit to the people we can and should pray for.

Is there a Christian parent anywhere who doesn’t pray for his or her children? When they leave the nest—even it’s only to go to school—we know that they are beyond our physical care, if only for a while, so we ask God (or their guardian angels) to take care of them. Once they leave the nest for good, sometimes the only way we can continue to care for them is through our prayers.

We pray for the sick, for those facing a particular trial, for those on a trip, for the newly married, for the bereaved, for those who are having difficulties with their faith, for all our friends and acquaintances. And yes, we should also pray for our enemies—people whom we have antagonized for one reason or another.

Prayers for the dead are a source of controversy because many good Christians believe that it’s too late to pray someone other than the deceased. They don’t all understand the Catholic doctrine of purgatory.

Neither, though, do many Catholics. They sometimes think of it as a place between heaven and hell, and it is not. Purgatory is the place given to a person’s purification, not to a place the soul might go after death.

Catholics believe, the relatives and friends of the deceased, can assist those who have died with our prayers of intercession. This is part of the doctrine of the communion of saints that we say we believe when we recite the Apostles’ Creed.

The souls in purgatory are not separated from the saints in heaven or from us on Earth. We all remain united in the Mystical Body of Christ, and we can therefore offer up prayers and good works on behalf of our brothers and sisters in their process of purification.

Cynthia Dewes

Cornucopia/Cynthia Dewes

Human possibility comes with Christ’s birth

Imagine a world in which God chose not to send a Messiah to us, which is after all the seasonal celebration. What would the world be like?

For one thing, there would be no limit to despotism, and selfishness would be the human condition, with evil reason being the primary reason for every aspect of life. There would be no apparent reason to choose the God of one’s selfishness as the only sensible motive for human behavior.

Survival and self-interest would rule out of necessity. Babies would be born of simple lust rather than love, and nurtured or physical dominance. Ordinary people would follow these tribal leaders and do their utmost to obey them, recognizing no reasonably stable existence. They would use the Earth and its creatures without any theoretical care or preservation of their usefulness.

War and fighting in general would be the one constant people relied on their abilities. And their differences would be primitive rather than ideological or spiritual. The position would seem to lack the need to be in battle, not for the common good, but for their personal gain of more territory, greater wealth or other people to turn into slaves.

Often, these leaders would make themselves into objects of worship since everyone would know they were the source of their security. Again, ordinary people would be the ones providing the required effort of the community.

Life would be a pretty bleak prospect for most folks, and joy as we know it would be almost impossible. The best people could hope for would be physical survival without injury or cruel subjugation.

Luckily, our world and sent us a Messiah, and we have the happy feast of Christmas to remember and celebrate that fact. In despair, even in the condition of the world without Christ, hope is the nature of Christ’s world.

But does this mean that all is sweetness and joy now? Are we blessed or even less, and greed eliminated from human life? Well, no. We’re not exactly home free. We have the privilege of hope but, as with most privileges, it comes attached to responsibilities as well.

One free will, like Christ, is a gift from God. And so we have the responsibility to work, to raise kids, to live with neighbors, in fact, to do everything a gift according to God’s will. God has given us the responsibility not to waste our opportunity.

We can make babies out of love and commit to them and their other parent for life. We can perform our work in the way the absolutely best way we’re able. We can be truly present for everyone we meet, we can listen, we can lift them up with affection and concern. We can care for our Earth and resolve our differences with patience and reason.

We can do everything with hope and optimism because that is what Christ brings to our human world. Merry Christmas indeed!

(Cynthia Dewes, a member of St. Paul the Apostle Parish in Greencastle, is a regular columnist for The Criterion.)

Faith and Family/Sean Gallagher

Christian the gift of Providence at Christmas

We are fast approaching the end of what could well be described as the “Year of Providence” for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis.

In February, we welcomed the Holy See’s Congregation for the Causes of Saints to tell us how Blessed Sarah Doyle cleared the way for the canonization of now-Saint Sarah Doyle. That is a fitting prelude to the feast of the SISTERS of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods.

Recently, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints announced the date on which the canonization liturgy would take place.

And, of course, on that grand Oct. 15 morning, hundreds of Catholics from across the archdiocese were at St. Peter’s Square in Rome to witness the solemn declaration of Indiana’s first saint.

All these moments were once-in-a-lifetime events to be remembered and cherished forever by the faithful throughout central and southern Indiana.

But as Christmas is now only days away, perhaps this year’s focus on a holy woman’s trust in Providence can lead us to do more than trust it; and do more than those we’ll unwrap on the morning of Dec. 25.

Our heavenly Father not only provides for our needs. Through my experience of life with my family, I have become convinced that he also provides those things that can make life truly sweet.

But as Christmas is now only days away, perhaps this year’s focus on a holy woman’s trust in Providence can lead us to do more than trust it; and do more than those we’ll unwrap on the morning of Dec. 25.

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The Sunday Readings

Sunday, Dec. 24, 2006

- Micah 5:1-4a
- Hebrews 10:5-10

This weekend, the Church observes the last Sunday in Advent. The first reading is from the Book of Micah, who is regarded as one of the Minor Prophets, followed by a relatively short book, containing only seven chapters. The author was a contemporary of Isaiah, the first section of the Book of Isaiah. Very few biographical facts are known about the author of Micah. He came from a small village some 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem. However, nothing is known of his background.

As did so many prophets of ancient Israel, Micah saw his mission as calling the People away from sin and to God. Religious practices were sparse, and often insincere and poorly presented when they did occur. This weekend’s readings offers a passage from Micah in which the prophet promises that a Savior will come. This Savior will lead the people away from sin and to God. The Savior will come from Bethlehem.

Of course, for Micah, the reference is to David, who was born in Israel. David, who will come from Bethlehem.

Heavy with its Hebrew symbolism, this epistle also is renowned as the great source of extolling Jesus as Lord and as the Lamb of God.

In Hebrews, Jesus appears as the perfect victim and priest. His sacrifice on Calvary was sublime, perfect, utterly unique and eternal. Its effects of reconciling humanity with God will never cease. Thus, no other sacrifices are necessary. All has been accomplished.

It is the story of the Visitation. Mary travels from her own home to a place in the land of Judah. Traditionally, it has been thought that this is the place the woman now called Em Karem. Once a few miles from Jerusalem, it has been absorbed by the growth of the city and for all practical purposes is today a part of Jerusalem.

My Journey to God

Christmas Eve

The flowers are bright.
The candles are glowing,With a breath of excitement.
The night is aliveThe people rejoicingThe wreaths and the ribbons,
The trees and the lights,
The Heavenly Child.
The Virgin so mild,Who so beautifully sings.
The angel on highThe shepherds and kings,
Christmas is here.

The Nativity of the Lord

This is the last day of Advent, and for most people Christmas Eve will be a busy, hurried day even as it is a day of excitement, anticipation and joy. Nevertheless, it is not too late to spiritually prepare for Christmas. So, in these readings, on the last day of Advent, the Church calls us to Jesus.

He is everything; the Church emphatically and joyfully declares it. It gives us the words of Hebrews. It reinforces its belief in Jesus as Lord by recalling the Visitation. And, in the words of Micah, it reminds us that when we allow Jesus to come to us, all peace and happiness will abide with us.

Reflection

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My Journey to God

Christmas Eve

The night is alive
With a breath of excitement.
The church bells are pealing
A tale of enticement.
The people are coming
With hearts gladly aching.
O Christians rejoice!
Christmas is here.

The candles are glowing,
The flowers are bright.
The priest is singing with all of his might!
The incense delivers our prayers up above;
Receive them, dear Lord, in your infinite love.
O Christians rejoice!
Christmas is here.

And the holy and stars,
The shepherds and kings,
The angel on high
Who so beautifully sings.
The Virgin so mild,
The Heavenly Child.
O Christians rejoice!
Christmas is here.

The trees and the lights,
The wreaths and the ribbons,
The people rejoicing

By Linda Abner

(Linda Abner is a member of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Indianapolis.)

Daily Readings

Monday, Dec. 25

- The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

Midnight

Isaiah 9:1-6
Psalm 96:1-3, 11-13
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14
Dawn

Isaiah 62:11-12
Psalm 97:1, 6, 11-12
Titus 3:4-7
Luke 2:15-20
Day

Isaiah 52:7-10
Psalm 98:1-6
Hebrews 1:1-6
John 1:1-18
or John 1:1-5, 9-14

Tuesday, Dec. 26

Stephen, first martyr

Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59
Psalm 31:3-4, 6-8, 17-21
Matthew 10:17-22

Wednesday, Dec. 27

John, Apostle and evangelist

1 John 1:1-4
Psalm 97:1-2, 5-6, 11-12
John 20:2-8

Thursday, Dec. 28

The Holy Innocents, martyrs

1 John 1:5-2:2
Psalm 1:24-25; 57-8
Matthew 2:13-18

Friday, Dec. 29

The Fifth Day in the Octave of Christmas

1 John 2:3-11
Psalm 96:1-3, 5b-6
Luke 2:22-35

Saturday, Dec. 30

The Sixth Day in the Octave of Christmas

1 John 2:12-17
Psalm 96:7-10
Luke 2:36-40

continued on page 22

Scripture offers clues about the Communion of Saints

Q Recently, a co-worker asked about our belief in the Communion of Saints, specifically Scripture references about our having a relationship with the ones who have died and are in heaven. Do those in heaven retain their own identity? Are they aware of others in eternity? Are we aware of people on Earth? Or do they exist as part of the entire consciousness that is the Creator? (Virginia)

A First, we must admit that there is much we do not know—and could not possibly know—about the nature of eternal life with God.

Even in heaven, while we somehow will be absorbed into the divine life of love, we will not be God. The divine nature will forever be beyond our ability to comprehend totally.

On the other hand, there is much we do know from God’s revelation. Christian belief on the subject comes directly or indirectly from the Scriptures, especially from the New Testament, and most particularly from the actions of Jesus after the Resurrection.

For St. Paul, the risen Christ is the model of what our own resurrection will be like. The Father who raised Jesus will also raise us to be with him (2 Cor 4:14). Paul’s most elaborate discussion of this theme is in 1 Corinthians 15. The resurrection of the Christ is proof of our liberation from sin. Christ is the first to rise; we rise in him. Our resurrection fulfills our Lord’s victory over sin and death.

So, what was Jesus like after the Resurrection?

To offer just one example, one of the most beautiful descriptions of the heavenly kingdom we receive from the early Fathers of the Church is a homily by a giant of early Christianity, Bishop Cyril of Carthage, North Africa.

Before his martyrdom under the Roman emperor in the year 259, Bishop Cyril encouraged his people to be strong and not afraid to die for the faith they had received from the Christian past.

Here on Earth we are exiles, he reminded them, while death is a homecoming that we should welcome.

“We look on paradise as our country,” he said, “and a great crowd of our loved ones awaits us there; a countless throng of parents, brothers and children long for us to join them. Assured though they are of their own salvation, they are still concerned about ours. What joy both for them and for us to see one another and embrace!”

“There the merit is rewarded, those who fulfilled the demands of justice by providing for the poor. In obedience to the Lord’s command, they turned their earthly possessions into heavenly treasures.

“Let all our longing be to join them as soon as we may.”

Some Christians may disagree with Cyril and with us. But at least we can speak confidently that our belief in this aspect of the Communion of Saints is one that derives from Jesus himself, and from the first great leaders of our faith who walked in his steps.

(A free brochure in English or Spanish, answering questions that Catholics ask about baptism practices and sponsors, is available by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Father John Dietzen, Box 5515, Peoria, IL 61612. Questions may be sent to Father John Dietzen at the same address or by e-mail in care of jdietzen@aol.com.)
HIV/AIDS finds world still behind on target goals to combat the disease. Federal marriage amendment fails on cloture vote in Senate. Cardinal Walter Kasper, Vatican’s chief ecumenist, warns Church of England bishops that if they ordain women bishops it will destroy possibility of full unity with Catholics and Orthodox.

Philippine legislators pass bills to abolish death penalty. At spring meeting in Los Angeles, bishops approve new translation of key Mass prayers. They also study restructuring of USCCB and approve a 10-year extension of federal funding of human embryonic stem-cell research.

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4. Youths lead by example as archdiocese continues to help hurricane victims recover

The utter devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 could not help but overflow into the next calendar year.

The efforts to restore the livelihood and well-being of the peoples of Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana is still in full swing, and it seems it will be for some time. Not once, but twice the leadership for youth ministry in the archdiocese endeavored this year to take dozens of young people right into the heart of the devastation—Biloxi, Miss.—to do their hands and the messy, harrowing about need healing for the region.

Our special correspondent, Katie Berger, wrote: “In Pascagoula and Biloxi, the youths spent their days working on jobs that ranged from removing debris from yards and beaches to helping with homes that hadn’t been touched since the hurricane.”

5. Six Catholic schools named as Blue Ribbon Schools

The archdiocese continued its track record of excellence in education this year as it saw six Catholic schools earn the recognition of the U.S. Department of Education as “No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence.”

The six schools earning that honor are Christ the King School in Indianapolis, Father Michael Shawe Memorial Jr./Sr. High School in Madison, St. Lawrence School in Columbus, St. Lawrence School in Indianapolis, St. Lawrence School in Louisville and St. Monica School in Indianapolis.

It is a distinction for schools who either achieved the top 10 percent or a nation or who have “at least 40 percent of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds that dramatically improve student performance on state tests.”

In the past four years, 21 different schools in the archdiocese have earned the Blue Ribbon distinction. No other diocese in the United States has matched that distinction.

6. Legacy for Our Mission campaign moves into full gear

The archdiocese is now in the middle of a three-year $100 million capital campaign that is coming to parishes in waves.

The year 2006 saw not only the successful conclusion of the “pilot wave,” but also the beginning of the campaign in more than 125 counties of Illinois and 27 parishes in more than six churches in some parishes.

The funds raised in the campaign “will benefit both the parishes that have raised the funds as well as the archdiocese’s shared parishes and parishes that will continue to benefit from this campaign, as well as its conclusion.”

7. First class graduates from Richmond’s Seton Catholic High School

Eleven seniors got the exciting chance this year when they became the first to graduate from Seton Catholic High School in Richmond—a new school opened in 2002.

The students were the first class to graduate from a Catholic high school in Richmond in 70 years. (The former St. Andrew High School closed in 1936.)

8. St. Vincent Health celebrates 125 years

A major milestone for Catholic health care in Indiana was also the chance to recall humbler roots and a nation’s first hospital.

St. Vincent Health, started in 1881 as a handful of religious sisters, celebrated 125 years of providing health care and continuing a mission to serve Jesus Christ in the poor.

“The four Daughters of Charity came with just $34.77 and a dream of taking care of the city’s sick and underserved,” wrote assistant editor John Shaughnessy. “As they worked to convert an abandoned seminary into a downtown Indianapolis hospital, the sisters never imagined that they were starting what has become one of the largest healthcare systems in Indiana—16 hospitals serving 45 counties under the name of St. Vincent Health.”

9. Scott Nobbe is ordained to the priesthood

An event that is always a celebration for the archdiocese—and a high note for the year—is the ordination of one or more men into the lifelong service of the priesthood—a service dedicated to bringing the saving grace of the sacraments to the people of central and southern Indiana.

This year, Scott Nobbe was ordained a priest at SS. Peter and Paul Cathedral during a June 24 Mass that reported Sean Gallagher described as “a hungry imbued with rich symbols, the love of his family and friends, and the fellowship of Archbishop Daniel M. Buechlein and his other brother priests.”

10. Local coverage of Pope Benedict XVI’s first encyclical, “God is Love”

The inclusion of this last top news story was a matter of some debate in the newsroom, as it really an international story that didn’t originate in our archdiocese.

While the encyclical Deus Caritas Est (“God is Love”) was certainly covered by a broad range of media, it was a document that only began to be discussed for its local implications in a two-part series written by reporter Sean Gallagher.

“Catholics across the archdiocese have been reading the pope’s words and considering their meaning for their everyday lives of faith,” Gallagher wrote.

The encyclical covered a lot of ground, from a discussion on married love to charitable work to the connection of love to the Eucharist.

(To read more about these 10 stories, including links to all our original Criterion news coverage in 2006, log on to our Web site at www.CriterionOnline.com.)

The archdiocese continues to “shoot straight from the shoulder” with its characteristic forthrightness.

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Please submit in writing to our office by 10 a.m. Thursday before the week of publication; see page for deadline dates.

Obituaries of archdiocesan priests and religious sisters are listed elsewhere in The Criterion. Order priests and religious sisters mentioned in these obituaries or have other connections to them; are separate obituaries


DEEM, Charles E., 67, St. Monica, Indianapolis, Dec. 3. Father of William Young. Brother of Marilyn Young.


KERN, James, P. 83, St. Michael the Archangel, Indianapolis, Nov. 30. Father of Dr. P. and Philip Kern.


PHELPS, Joan C., 80, St. Luke, Indianapolis. Nov. 29. Mother of Georgia Palmer. Mansioner of Ethel and Bill and Joe Phelps.


Providence Sister Mary Esther Larkin was a teacher and principal

Providence Sister Mary Esther Larkin died on Dec. 1 at Mother Theodore Hall at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. She was 92.

The Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated on Dec. 5 at the Church of the Immaculate Conception at the motherhouse. Burial followed at the sisters’ cemetery.

The former Alice Muriel Larkin was born on Aug. 29, 1914, in Loogoasto, Ind. She entered the congregation of the Sisters of Providence on Aug. 15, 1932, professed first vows on Jan. 23, 1935, and finally professed vows on Aug. 15, 1940. During 74 years as a member of the congregation, Sister Mary Esther ministered as a teacher and principal for 52 years at Catholic schools staffed by the sisters in Indiana and Illinois. In the archdiocese, Sister Mary Esther served at St. Charles Borromeo School in Bloomington from 1953-56, the former Holy Trinity School in Indianapolis from 1956-67 and St. Simon the Apostle School in Fort Wayne from 1967-79.

She also ministered at St. Michael School in Greenfield from 1977-79, Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Parke County from 1979-81 and St. Lawrence School in Indianapolis in 1984-89.

At the motherhouse, Sister Mary Esther seated in health care services from 1981-82, as a receptionist from 1982-83. She retired as the sisters’ senior ministry from 2001 until her death.

Surviving are three sisters, Martha Keith of Punta Gorda, Fla.; Mary Pat Thompson of Largo, Fla. and Dorothy Williams of Loogosto, Ind.; as well as several nieces and nephews.

Memorial gifts may be sent to the Sisters of Providence, St. Mary-of-the-Woods, St. Mary-of-the-Woods, IN 47460.

Providence Sister Margaret Ellen O’Conner was a teacher, librarian

Providence Sister Margaret Ellen O’Conner was born on Dec. 7 at the Church of the Immaculate Conception at the motherhouse. Buried followed at the sisters’ cemetery.

The former Ellen Mary O’Conner was born on July 24, 1917, in South Bend, Ind.

She entered the congregation of the Sisters of Providence on July 1, 1934, professed first vows on Jan. 23, 1937, and professed final vows on Jan. 23, 1950.

During 72 years as a member of the congregation, Sister Margaret Ellen ministered as a teacher for 43 years at Catholic schools staffed by the sisters in Indiana, Illinois, Maryland and the District of Columbia. She also served as a Sister of Providence of the circulation librarian at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods from 1981-92. From 1992 until 2000, Sister Margaret Ellen resided in residential services at the motherhouse then began her prayer ministry with the senior sisters in the archdiocese. The senior Sister Margaret Ellen taught at St. Joan of Arc School in Indianapolis from 1943-45, the former Cathedral Grade School in Indianapolis from 1948-50 and St. Andrew School in Indianapolis from 1950-56.

Surviving are two sisters, Elizabeth O’Bastion of Ogdabook Terrace, Ill.; and Providence Sister Anne Kevin O’Connor of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, St. Mary-of-the-Woods, N.C. and one brother, Donald O’Conor of Normal, Ill. and Maurice O’Connor of Overland Park, Kan.

Memorial gifts may be sent to the Sisters of Providence, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, St. Mary-of-the-Woods, IN 47460.
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Ed Isakson, Director, Human Resources
Archdiocese of Indianapolis
P.O. Box 1410
Indianapolis, IN 46206

Fax: (317) 261-3389

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