

PRAY

Loving God, help us to make room for our Son, Jesus, in our lives. Help us live his gospel that calls us to share our coats when we have two, to treat one another fairly, and make room for one another. Amen.

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SPIRIT

My brother kept hounding me to join him, but I wouldn't go. Then on Christmas morning, when I started to complain about the ancient Greece project I had to do for my World Civ class, he dragged me along.

He volunteered at a soup kitchen called The House of Bread, but I hadn't a clue about what he did. In the car, he said they made breakfast to feed the hungry. Everyone was admitted, no questions asked. It sounded like no big deal.

But driving through this Hartford neighborhood frightened me. Broken windows and graffiti blighted the rows of brick buildings. Litter lined the street and traffic signs were knocked over. As I walked the narrow sidewalk, a bitter smell of urine pierced my nostrils, so I scurried to the door. Was it this important to give to others?

Inside the hall round tables cluttered the room. A small adjacent kitchen had two warped frying pans, one spatula, and a pile of mismatched plates chipped at the edges. A man stood by the stove with a bowl of pancake batter. A woman lined up paper plates and utensils on a table. My brother and I were assigned to serve people.

For four years Tim Caricon has frequently started his Saturdays by making pancakes for the 9 a.m. breakfast at Catholic Charities Dorothy Day Center. His school makes and serves this breakfast for homeless people on the first and third Saturdays every month. A high five from this football player can set a smaller person on the floor. "I love cooking," he says. "This breakfast is a way to do charity and have a good time."



Even before we were ready, I could hear voices of people who lined the sidewalk. Not until the door was opened did I see what a motley collection of people they were. Some of the men had missing teeth, most of the women had ripped clothing, and one man was so filthy I was sure he hadn't showered in days or months. I held my breath each time I passed him, but I also feared for my life. Was he a criminal? A drug addict? Did he conceal a weapon that he would brandish to take us hostage? As I wove in and out of tables to deliver pancakes, I kept turning around to check my back.

What had I gotten myself into?

People asked whether I was one of the nuns who ran the place—more importantly if I could pass out extra maple syrup. I answered with quick

responses, then turned to my brother and whispered, "They can't be all homeless."

He reminded me, "No questions asked."

I wasn't satisfied.

But when a young mother walked in without a winter coat, a baby in her arms and two toddlers clinging to her, compassion overwhelmed me.

WITH
GIFT OF
FINEST
WHEAT

by Nancy Manning

She couldn't have been more than 15, my own age. Three men immediately gave up their places. The girl seated her toddlers. She opened up the blankets wrapped around her children, and I saw they were still dressed in their pajamas. Watching them, I felt a mixture of sadness and anger. Children shouldn't be here on Christmas or any other day. They should be home snuggling in their beds or playing cheerfully with the new Iron Man Action Figure or the Dora the Explorer backpack Santa had left them.



"The people appreciate the food. We appreciate the need," says Ann.

"I get to hang out with people I know, and people I don't know yet," says sophomore Hanna.

"When people in the line see blueberries in the pancakes, their faces light up," says Mikayla. "That makes me feel good."

As a child, I believed life was unfair. The sky was blue and not purple, my favorite color. Halloween came only once a year. My brother always won the wishbone at Thanksgiving. Every Christmas my family celebrated the birthday of Baba, my Ukrainian grandmother. Why couldn't I get double the presents?

When I was eight, my father injured his back on the job and was out of work, so money was tight. At Christmas we received only one gift each. Mine was a chalkboard. Why would I want that? I hated school, longed for June and freedom from the bondage of teachers and the imprisonment of homework.

Visiting my cousin that year, I counted too many board games for one person. A mountain of new clothes, hair bands, tights and patent leather shoes choked the bottom of the spruce tree that emanated a sweet pine scent. Life really wasn't fair. Why wasn't I born into my cousin's family?

Returning to school that year provided more torture. All the other third-graders showed off their new outfits. On either side of me, a boy boasted a new sweater and corduroy pants. In front of me, a girl wore a colorful jumper and the gold charm bracelet I kept wishing for. I had to suffer with the drab blue dress I had worn on the opening day back in

September. Worse than that, when two boys pointed at my worn shoes and giggled, I curled my feet under my chair to hide the rusty buckles and the wrinkles from wear.

But here in this crummy little soup kitchen, I was seeing real hardship firsthand.

I tried to bubble with conversation, "Good morning and welcome."

The mother pressed the bundled baby to her chest.

I knelt down by the boy and the girl and wished them each a Merry Christmas. I thought about asking what gifts they opened this morning from Santa, but then remembered the years he barely made it to my house.

Questions began to simmer in my brain. Where could I obtain some winter coats quickly? Were there toys anywhere in the kitchen? How could I get those children to smile? If I had my old



chalkboard, we could play Ticktacktoe or Hangman.

My brother arrived with plates of pancakes and I helped serve the children.

The youngsters gobbled the small cubes I cut up. Maple syrup dribbled down their chins. Their feet didn't reach the floor; they kicked their legs happily back and forth as they ate.

After the mother had finished the last crumb of pancake and wiped the children's faces, she wrapped the makeshift jackets around each toddler.

I swallowed hard. "Anything else I can get you?"

"We're fine," the mother answered, head lowered. "Rashon and Teesha,



say thank you to the lady."

Rashon waved. Teesha looked at me and crinkled her nose. "No lady. An angel."

Blushing, I grinned. Teesha beamed back an enormous smile.

Later, as our crew washed the vacant tables, put away the supplies, and cleaned the grill, joy danced in my heart. I knew I'd return.

Each Christmas I passed out more plates of pancakes, but I never saw the woman or her three children again. I never again asked, "Why me?" If I looked around, there was always someone worse off. The true meaning of Christmas became equally obvious: not to receive but to give of yourself. No questions asked.



SUNDAY GOSPEL

3rd Sunday in Advent

John announces one greater than he.

NARRATOR: John the Baptist was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the region of the Jordan River. Crowds of people came to him.

CROWDS: What should we do?

JOHN THE BAPTIST: Let anyone with two coats give to someone who has none. Anyone who has food should do the same.

NARRATOR: Tax collectors came to be baptized.

TAX COLLECTORS: Teacher, what should we do?

JOHN THE BAPTIST: Don't take more taxes than people owe.

SOLDIERS: What about us?

JOHN THE BAPTIST: Do not bully anyone. Denounce no one falsely. Be content with your pay.

NARRATOR: The people were full of anticipation, wondering in their hearts whether John might be the messiah.

JOHN THE BAPTIST: I am baptizing you in water, but there is one to come who is mightier than I. I am not worthy to loosen his sandal strap. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire.

NARRATOR: Using exhortations such as this, he preached the good news to the people.

Luke 3.10-18

Las Posadas, a Hispanic Tradition

Beginning December 16 of each year, many Spanish-speaking communities celebrate Las Posadas. For nine consecutive evenings, a community re-enacts Mary and Joseph's search for lodging. Accompanied by members of the congregation, a man and a woman representing Joseph and Mary knock on the doors of homes and churches, asking at each for shelter. Joseph sings, *En el nombre del cielo, os pido posada. Pues no puede andar mi esposa amada. In the name of Heaven, I beg you for lodging, For she cannot walk my beloved wife.*

The hardhearted innkeeper responds, *This is not an inn, so keep on going, I cannot open - you may be a thief.*

The next verse begins: *Don't be inhuman - have mercy on us. The God of the heavens will reward you.*

At each stop the group begs for shelter, and each time the door is closed to the Holy Family. Only on Christmas Eve do they find welcome, and the celebration of Christmas begins.

For some, this tradition is not just a re-enactment of an ancient story. For too many, the closed doors and harsh words are a painful present reality.

Even those who come to the United States with all the required documents can feel the sting of rejection. Differences in clothing, culture, language, and appearance can make people afraid.

The American Catholic church is now one third Hispanic and growing. Like earlier immigrants who arrived in great numbers during the 19th century, Hispanic Catholics bring a wealth of customs and a deep faith to enrich our 21st century experience. Santa Claus, complete with his sleigh of reindeer, comes from northern European immigrants. The popular carol "Silent Night" originates in Germany, Martin Luther the author.

Customs like Las Posadas, or celebrating the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12, are reminders for us to cut through today's commercialism and remember the true meaning of Christmas.



QUESTIONS

- 1 What is hard about not judging poor people? What is easy?
- 2 What changes the author's attitude?
- 3 What traditions like volunteering does your family keep? In what cultural traditions do you participate?
- 4 In the gospel, how does John the Baptist advise us to treat those less fortunate than ourselves?
- 5 What does the gospel tell us about how to treat one another as we prepare for Christmas?



The scriptures reveal who God is.

The Second Vatican Council made Bible readers out of many Catholics. In the four centuries after the Protestant Reformation, the Bible had become known more as a Protestant than Catholic book because Martin Luther made the scriptures the basis for his reform, which began in 1517.

The Second Vatican Council urged priests and lay people to study the Bible. The bishops of the council called for a new Sunday lectionary that put more scripture on the table of the Word at Mass.



A committee created three year-long cycles of scripture readings for the Sundays of the Church year. The new lectionary reads from all four gospels and includes generous selections from the scriptures of Israel and the letters apostles wrote to Christian communities they founded.

Verbum Dei are the first words in Latin and title of the Council's Document on Revelation. Verbum Dei means Word of God. The Council stresses that God reveals God's own self in creation, in the history of Israel, and most fully in Jesus Christ, in whom God becomes one of us.

To become friends people hang out, talk, express our feelings and interests, and do activities together. Our holy history is the story of people getting to know God and discovering God wants to know us. Israel's relationship with God in history reveals what God is like—creative, faithful, loving, always seeking friendship. The stories about Israel's encounters with God become what Christians call the Old Testament.

God calls Abraham and Sarah to move to a new land and promises them descendants as numerous as the stars.

God calls Moses to free the Hebrew slaves who cry out in Egypt and makes a covenant, a friendship agreement, with these newly free people. They become God's own people by keeping the ten commandments; God becomes their God.

God calls David to unite the tribes of Israel into a kingdom. Solomon builds a great temple.

A long line of prophets—Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah—speaks for God to the kings who follow David and Solomon but who make alliances with other nations and turn to their gods. A longing for a wise ruler who will build peace arises in the voices of the prophets—a longing for a messiah.

When the Babylonians defeat the people of Israel and destroy the temple, the priests in captivity write down these ancient oral stories. These sacred writings declare Israel's faith that God speaks a living word. God does not shape the world like the Babylonians gods through the power of violence and killing. Israel's God creates by speaking: "God said, 'Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw the light was good'" (Genesis 1.33-4).

John the Baptist is the last of Israel's prophets. He tells people in Sunday's gospel about how to prepare the way for God to come among them.

In Jesus Christ, God comes among us as a person. Who sees Jesus sees his Father, says the gospel of John (14.9). The Second Vatican Council writes, "The most intimate truth revealed about God and human salvation shines forth for us in Christ" (Verbum Dei, #2).

The New Testament contains the stories of Jesus' words and actions and the stories of the apostles who spread his message and gathered communities in his name. Of the 27 books in the New Testament, the most important are the four gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each tell the story of Jesus' public actions, teachings, death, and resurrection.

The Catholic Church has two sources of its origins—the sacred scriptures in which we hear the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit and sacred tradition, the teachings of

the apostles and practices of the early Christian communities.

The council insists all baptized Christians have an active role in handing on our faith and living it in the world.

"The tradition in the Church makes progress in the world with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in **INSIGHT** into the realities through the **CONTEMPLATION** and **STUDY OF BELIEVERS** who **ponder these things in their hearts**. It comes from the intimate sense of **SPIRITUAL REALITIES** which they experience. And it comes from the **PREACHING OF THOSE WHO, ON SUCCEEDING TO THE OFFICE OF BISHOP, have received the sure charism of truth**. Thus as the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing towards the **FULLNESS OF DIVINE TRUTH**, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in it" (#8).

FAITH in ACTION

- 1 What insights into the gospels have you gained from contemplation and study? How do you ponder Jesus' message in your heart?
- 2 What spiritual realities do you experience in our contemporary world, which many call secular and atheistic?
- 3 What does Jesus show you about what God is like?

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