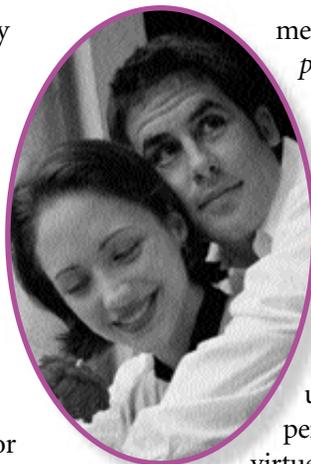


An Experience of Wonder

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

Wonder is the first response of every human person to the sudden appearance of the divine. It's that eye-widening, mouth-dropping "wow" many of us quietly experience at times during prayer or at Mass — just where you'd expect it! Where we often miss this *exact same response*, however, is when we first encounter those individuals the Lord has carefully chosen to send into our lives. The world tells us that these "fateful" meetings flower because of similar backgrounds or good chemistry. But the Christian recognizes the presence of her Lord — even if she doesn't realize it at the time. No matter the circumstances, our first response to the divine is always wonder. Here's one instance in my life when this happened to me.



met her. This interior recognition of a *completely unexpected encounter with the divine* will always invoke wonder in the human heart.

COME AND SEE

Look carefully at the people who are an occasional source of wonder in your own life. (And if there's no one, we'll talk about that later.) Anything genuinely human that attracts you to another person — their love, their inner beauty, their virtue, their stewardship — is a fruit of the Spirit of Christ living within them, even if they have allowed him only a little room. Since Jesus is the most fully human "firstborn of many sons," the peo-

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An UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

Like most freshmen, I met hundreds of new people in the first few weeks of college. But in the midst of this blur, one young woman stood out: a cute, short Catholic girl from Minnesota who lived down the hall.

Please understand: cute, short Catholic girls from Minnesota were a dime a dozen at my college. So what made this one such a source of wonder to me? At age 18, Mary Beth "Chip" Dornbach knew how to love people with a depth, intimacy and maturity that was startling and recognizable. I could tell by the way she talked about her family and friends back home, by the way she asked so intently about mine. At the time, I could never have articulated what drew me to her. All I knew was that I wanted to be her friend.

Twenty-four years later, I realize that I experienced Christ's presence living in Chip the minute I

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Bringing Wonder to a Cynical World



Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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ple who have accommodated him in his fullness are doubly startling to those they encounter. There is a spirit within them that makes you want to draw near.

Before the disciples Andrew and John knew Christ, they had heard very little about him – in the same way we encounter someone new in any social situation. But after they met, Jesus inspired such wonder in them that all they wanted to know was, “where are you staying?” (*Jn 1:38*). This response is as human and elementary as my first talks with my dear friend Chip. It’s that same interior pull. Where are you from? Which dorm room is yours? I want to know you.

Christ’s response to the disciples’ very human inquiry is “come, and you will see” (*Jn 1:39*). And this, too, is the path of all relationships. Because his life with us is so rooted in all of human reality, the Lord has shown us that the path to intimacy with him is the exact same path we take when we get close to family members and friends who walk with him, too. First comes the wonder, the attraction we experience when we recognize his startling, unexpected presence. Then comes an openness and attention to find out who he really is. Only after this important “getting to know you” step takes place can the relationship deepen with time and trust into true friendship and intimate love. Like a best friend. Like a spouse.

DELETING WONDER

So if the path to Christ is as simple as this, why do so many of us still feel so disconnected from him? Fr. Julián Carrón of the

Diocese of Madrid, Spain, observes, “We cannot avoid wonder, but we can delete it a moment later. That is the victory of preconception.”

Because we are human, we cannot help but be startled interiorly by the Lord’s infinite presence in the beauty and love in the people who walk with him, but we can choose not to respond. This is how we cut off an infinite source of splendor and richness that the Lord wants to pour into our lives.

Often, this happens when we have preconceived notions about a life with Christ in his Church. Some of us worry that a life with him will make us boring, muted, serious people. Others have met too many Christians who seem to have let Christ’s words into their heads, but kept his presence from their hearts. Consequently, there is little wonder invoked in the encounter with them.

SURPRISED ANEW

“Come see a man who told me everything I have done” (*Jn 4: 29*), the Samaritan woman called to her neighbors in wonder after her encounter with Jesus Christ. How many of them were startled by a new tone in her voice? How many others couldn’t hear it because of a preconceived notion of who she was? By deleting wonder, how many of them refused Christ’s invitation through her to come and see?

This is how the sudden encounter with the divine takes place – through other people. Yield to the wonder. Go and see what the Lord is trying to offer you. “Man must always let himself be surprised, disarmed, conquered anew by God,” urged the theolo-

gian Hans Urs Von Balthasar. The person who walks with Christ – for whom Christ is a living reality – is a source of wonder because he or she is the most fully alive, most fully human person around. If you have never met a Catholic like this, keep up your pursuit. Better yet, open your heart to the presence of Christ through a life in his Church and become this person yourself! ❖

Life After Sunday

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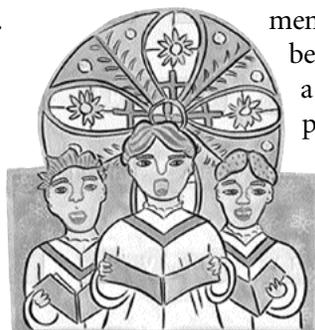
A Day For Wonder

Sunday is a day for wonder, a day the Lord has asked us to set aside to respond to him. Where is he? Right there in the living Word spoken by the lectors at Mass. There in the person of the priest, and especially in the form of humble bread and wine at Communion. There in the people in your family, in your fellow parishioners next to you in the pew.

If we miss these real encounters with him on Sunday, if we have trouble experiencing him in wonder and awe, then we must pray for the grace to put aside our distractions — as he has asked us to — so that we can recognize him.

KEEP HOLY THE SABBATH

So many people look at the third commandment as an imposition. But as every year goes by, I see the rich wisdom in the



Father's command to put one day aside for worship, rest and joy. "All of us respond not only to the need for rest, but also for the need for celebration which is inherent in our humanity," reflects Pope John Paul II. "Unfortunately, when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and

becomes merely part of a weekend, it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see 'the heavens.'

Hence, though ready to celebrate, they are really incapable of doing so" (*Dies Domini* #4).

Here's what we did at my house last Sunday: we went to Mass in two shifts because our two-year-old is a nightmare in Church. After Mass, my older daughter holed up in her room to do homework. I did laundry and cleaned up the weekly clutter. My husband took our second daughter to a CYO basketball game

Getting There...

My friend is an accomplished wedding photographer. He is also Jewish. During the past year, he made the decision to obey the third commandment and rely on the Lord to take care of him and his family. He now keeps holy his Sabbath day. Instead of posing brides on Saturday mornings, he goes to shul and spends the day with his family. He has already begun to see the fruits of his decision in the new attention to his family and the growth in his business on Saturday evenings and Sundays. — MBN ❖

while the baby took his afternoon nap. My older son played at a neighbor's house. Yes, we did have a nice dinner together, but mealtime lasted about 17 minutes — certainly not enough time to reconnect with each other after such a busy week.

I am trying to reclaim our Sundays by making them homework, work and errand-free days. Clearly this requires a little more organization than we are used to, but if it gives us one day of relative peace and joy, we will all be better for it! By not keeping Sunday more "holy," we have been missing one of the most important things in our lives — time to wonder at the great gift of each other. "Through Sunday rest, daily concerns and tasks can find their proper perspective," says Pope John Paul II. "The material things about which we worry give way to spiritual values. In a moment of encounter and less-pressured exchange, we see the true face of the people with whom we live" (*Dies Domini* #67). — MBN ❖

Mary's Wonder

On the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, we ponder Mary's reaction of wonder and awe to the words of the angel. Following is a reflection by St. Catherine of Siena: "Mary, was it fear that troubled you at the angels' word? If I ponder the matter in the light, it doesn't seem it was fear that troubled you, even though you showed some gesture of wonder and some agitation. What, then, were you wondering at? At God's great goodness, which you saw. And you were stupefied when you looked at yourself and knew how unworthy you were of such great grace. So you were overtaken by wonder and surprise at the consideration of your own unworthiness and weakness and of God's unutterable grace. So by your prudent questioning you showed your deep humility and, as I have said, it was not fear you felt but wonder at God's boundless goodness and charity toward the lowliness and smallness of your virtue." ❖

Signs and Wonders

In the Gospel, people always looked to the signs Christ performed with wonder and awe. For many in the crowd, this was the first step to realizing that Jesus was someone amazing, different and new. The disciples were also given the gift of performing signs when Christ commissioned them to “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons” (*Matt. 10:8*).

For the past 2,000 years, chronicles of the lives of Christians continue to be filled with signs and wonders. In fact, documentation of the presence of these miracles is a requirement for sainthood by the Church’s Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Yet, these events must be placed in their proper context. Just as in the Gospel, they are merely manifestations of the Lord’s presence to help his people along the path to him.



GREAT LOVERS

The saints are great lovers of Christ who are so filled with his

presence that they become a vibrant source of wonder to the people around them – and remain so today in the Communion of Saints. Some saints invoked wonder even through their bodies: St. Joseph of Cupertino levitated; St. Francis of Assisi, and in our own time, Blessed Padre Pio, bore the wounds of Christ; St. Teresa of Avila went into ecstatic trances after Communion.

Although these physical signs all seemed to be a great trial for these saints, the wonder they invoked attracted many people to “come and see.”

These saints realized that the wonder they invoked was not generated by them personally. Otherwise, their witness would have been a fraud. Only the pres-

Signs of the Times

The Church is always careful to document miraculous wonders, visions and apparitions because she does not want people getting so stuck on the signs that they never see Who they point to! The Gospel tells of Christ’s own frustration at people who would go no further than this first step in their relationship with him. Yet these signs of his presence never ceased. Today the most miraculous sign of his presence is in the Blessed Sacrament that sits in the tabernacle of every Catholic Church in the world. When was the last time you stopped in Church to marvel over this great mystery? ❖

ence of the divine can bring and sustain true wonder in the world. The saints are simply people who recognized the living presence of Christ and allowed him to live fully in their bodies, hearts, minds and souls. Then he did the work of bringing other people along *through them*. This is how the Lord created new congregations of priests and consecrated religious. The Franciscans, Carmelites, Palatines, Salesians – to name just a few — became new families of faith because each founding saint allowed the Lord to use him or her as his wondrous sign. These congregations, in turn, have become signs of wonder for the Church throughout the world. ❖

GETTING THERE ...

So how do you bring wonder into your family life? By deepening your relationship with Christ and allowing him to live in you. Even if there is no one else in your family who recognizes him, you will eventually become a source of wonder by the way you love and care for the people around you. This means going in after that family member who has hurt you deeply, by loving the one who has separated him- or herself from you. Even the most jaded family members will see what you are doing and be startled by your capacity for love and forgiveness. Although they may not respond, they will see. Perhaps someday, they will even come. ❖

Rituals of Wonder

BY JOHN M. CAPOBIANCO

My youngest son John thinks he's the family CEO. This seven-year old shows little doubt about his vocation. He considers it his personal mission to let everyone in the family know exactly who's in charge. For some reason, he saves his most forceful and difficult treatment for his most generous and dedicated family employee: his mother. I think every parent experiences this executive ego at one time or another. While it can be an exasperating challenge, cultivating a sense of sacred wonder in the little CEO can also bring fascinating encounters.

Such an encounter happened this past Christmas. While shopping for my wife, I stumbled upon a series of I.H. Hummel holy water fonts. One particular model, two angels perched above a water reservoir, curiously brought to mind the relationship between my son and his mother. Now I knew I would not exactly be scoring huge spousal points if my wife opened a holy water font as her only Christmas gift. Diamonds, yes. A holy water font? Yikes! Yet something about it intrigued me.

SACRAMENTALS LINK US TO THE DIVINE

I remembered our last few trips to Mass. John went out of his way to bless himself with holy water as we entered and left church. I thought, maybe this could be a simple thing we could have at home to provide a sense of the sacred, a sense of wonder at the ultimate CEO who moves us and keeps us "in being." Like the awe of daily prayer, the concreteness of sacramentals like holy water help establish a simple spiritual ritual that link us to the Divine. I imagined it might help my son carry a moment of wonder he experienced at church to our life at home everyday. So I bought the gift for my wife but did so with our little family terrorist in mind.

As the gift was opened, John asked, "what is that?" His mother replied haltingly, "It's a holy water font." A slightly raised eyebrow careened my way. "You hang it on the wall and keep it filled with



holy water so you can bless yourself at home," she said. "Maybe that can be your job, John," I quickly offered. "You can help us find a good place to hang it."

Later that week we selected a place at the bottom of our steps leading to our bedrooms. As John filled the font from a small bottle of holy water I picked up at church, he asked, "Why do you make the sign of the cross with the water?" For a moment I was taken back by his question.

"DUH"

Kids have such a pure way of turning the tables on their parents. Now I was the one challenged to express my faith. I thought for a moment of Blessed Padre Pio who in the midst of World War II was asked what was the greatest evil in the world. His reply: "Hypocrisy." Kids instinctively hone in on any perceived hypocrisy in their parents. It's like they need to know if we're for real. They want to know: can we really teach them the truth about life, about real love that satisfies the heart?

"The cross is the sign of how much God loves you," I told him. "You were supposed to die on that cross. But Jesus loved you so much that he died in your place. That's quite a big love." He looked at the font and then put his fingers in the water. "So every time you touch the water and make the sign of the cross, ask Jesus to help you love others the way he loves them. That

PRAYERS OF WONDER

This Lent, ask the Blessed Mother to draw you closer to the Presence of her Son through prayer. "Only in a distance of reverence, in adoration, in loving honor and shrouding can one even approach the divine things" wrote theologian Adrienne Von Speyr. "Christians can find only in the hidden silence of Mary's heart the true access to the interior world of the Son. Precisely the Marian prayers - novenas, litanies, the Rosary - are prayers which need and create peace, distance, time. They are all an exercise in the Mother's contemplation which mediates the contemplation of the Son." ❖

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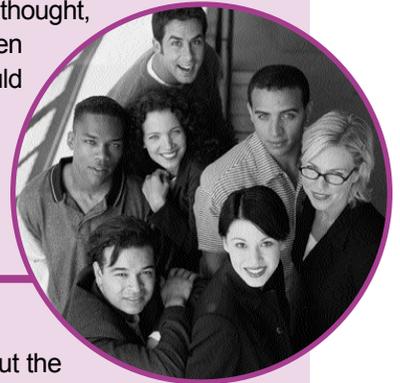
Wonderful Groups

Every parish has small groups of people who have banded together. Sometimes these little communities are just a few faithful friends who meet for daily Mass. Other times, they are more official, like the Sodality, Renew or a Seniors club.

When these groups are true signs of the presence of Christ, they invoke a quiet wonder to the parishioners around them. They invite a “come and see.” Since the friendship with Christ begins with a friendship between human persons, invite a fellow parishioner into your group or inquire about one that interests you. Perhaps this is the path the Lord is using to draw you near. ❖

HOW HAPPY WOULD WE BE ...

Catholics are called to be a sign of wonder to people of other faiths. In the 18th century, a still Protestant St. Elizabeth Ann Seton wrote the following to her sister, as the saint was seeing Catholicism up close in Italy: “How happy would we be if we believed what these dear souls believe, that they possess God in the Sacrament and that he remains in their churches and is carried to them when they are sick, oh my – when they carry the Blessed Sacrament under my window while I face the full loneliness and sadness of my case, I cannot stop the tears at the thought, ‘My God how happy would I be, even so far away from all so dear, if I could find you in the Church as they do. How many things I would say to you of the sorrows of my heart and the sins of my life’.” ❖



GETTING THERE ...

In 1993, St. Joseph’s parish in Rosemount, MN, started a weekly Bible Study of about 120 members. We begin and end each semester with a large group discussion by a biblical scholar. We meet in small groups during the school year. We follow the Little Rock Scripture series from St. John’s University in Collegeville, MN. We have covered over 15 books of both the Old and New testaments. Our small group is currently seven men who meet at 6:00 am on Tuesdays. We follow the Collegeville Bible commentary which asks 15 discussion questions each week over the assigned readings. Our one-hour weekly meeting is filled with fellowship, prayer and spiritual discussions. As a group, we have a rich spiritual bond.

We meet in my orthodontic office. I bring the Starbucks. We chat about the previous weekend’s sports for about ten minutes or so and then settle in to pray together. This prayer time has become the essential reason for us to gather each week. We structure our prayer as recommended by the Little Rock Series. First we visualize Christ — we welcome him. Next we thank the Lord for personal blessings. We follow thanksgiving with prayers of forgiveness. Here we pray for ourselves and ask others to pray for us. We finish our prayers by praying for others. We each have special intentions to offer. Our study lasts about 40 minutes. Then we finish up with one of us offering a closing prayer. We value our weekly meetings so much that we continue to

meet throughout the year. When our “semester” ends we slowly work through The Catechism of the Catholic Church. We cover about 10 pages per week. After two summers we have completed three-quarters of the text. This has offered lively discussion and has helped strengthen our personal faith as Catholic men. We all have different relationships throughout life. A men’s prayer group is a relationship we all cherish. The male barriers are dropped and we share deep spiritual experiences. Our group has changed us as Catholic friends, fathers and husbands. I can honestly say that we are closer to our Church because of our group.— Dr. Ronald J. Snyder, Rosemount, MN ❖

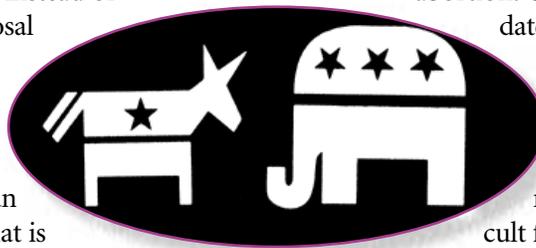
Bringing Wonder to a Cynical World

We need look no further than the American political process to see the cynicism that has woven itself deeply into our culture. As the presidential candidates make their speeches, as the commentators offer their opinions, it becomes increasingly difficult to find anything more than half-truths. Everyone's words seem so scripted, every action so staged. Reacting to this process, we become indifferent. We find it hard to be moved.

How Did This Happen?

Perhaps we are the ones to blame. As Catholics, we have been entrusted with the entire truth about the human person: we have experienced the living presence of Christ at work in our lives. Yet, influenced by the idea of "privatized religion," we have kept this wonder to ourselves. Many of us are wary of the public square out of respect for the beliefs of others or because we feel we have nothing new that would affect an

already muddy debate. Still others experience their Catholicism as a moral code instead of a relationship with a divine presence completely outside of themselves. When this happens the moral debate can easily deteriorate into just another half-truth – mine vs. yours — instead of the proposal of the universal truth about the human person that is for everyone.



No Escape Routes

How do we offer this truth to the world? By proposing the glorious dignity of the human person revealed in all of his or her splendor. We know this truth because God's Word is alive in us — because we have experienced it. But this truth can not invoke wonder in "politically correct" bits and pieces. "The Word of God, though horizontally bound up with humanity and history, pierces down vertically from heaven at every point and ... must be accepted by man in nakedness of heart without safety measures and escape routes," said the theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar.

The human person who is most fully alive in the truth will always invoke wonder because he or she is a sign of Christ's real presence in the world. In turn, the reduction of the human person will always cause the truth to lose its splendor. This is why Christian candidates who bring only part of

the Gospel message to the world — reducing it in its fullness — contribute greatly to the indifferent response of a cynical public. This is why we are so unmoved by candidates who simultaneously speak out on behalf of poor people and a woman's right to choose an abortion. Or by candidates who condemn abortion, while pushing policies that make it difficult for some members of society to support and sustain their families.

"I am the way, and the truth and the life," says Jesus of Nazareth. Candidates who use practical means to apply the Gospel truth in all its fullness about the human person will always be a sign of wonder — even when people freely chose to settle instead for the escape route of half-truths.

Be His Sign of Wonder

How can the rest of us bring some wonder back into the public square? By trusting the work of the Spirit of Christ. Sometimes it is difficult to talk with neighbors and colleagues who see only a surface reality — who see no evidence of a divine mystery at work in the world. Thank God our truth is not our own! The Lord is the One who will offer them his "come and see" if we open our hearts and allow him to live fully in us. By joining the political process, by engaging neighbors in conversation and friendship, we bring the

GETTING THERE ...

How can you bring Christ's truth to the political process this year? Call the Legislative Network of your (Arch)diocese and find out how you can help bring the life of the Church to the debate. Whether you make phone calls, write letters or visit legislators and members of their staff, you will have a personal impact. If Christ lives in you — if you speak his truth about the human person — the people you contact will wonder at the things you say. They may not respond, but their hearts will have been exposed to the presence of the divine. ❖

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Rituals of Wonder continued from page 6

means loving your brother and sister when they irritate you... or your classmates at school when they don't include you... or helping the person in the street who is hungry, or the one who has no home... or your mother when she doesn't give you what you want." He looked at me square in the eye. "If you allow him to love through you," I continued, "then you'll rise from the dead, just like he did." He seemed satisfied and took the little bottle of holy water and placed it on his dresser.

So far every week, the holy water slowly disappears, and he has faithfully embraced the job of keeping the font filled. And the little CEO is giving his old man his own lesson or two about the rituals of wonder. ❖

Bringing Wonder to a Cynical World continued from page 7

wonder of Christ's presence to the world. We offer the witness of what we have seen and heard by sharing the truth of our lives. As St. Teresa of Avila once said, "God has no hands now but yours, no eyes, but yours, no feet but yours." Christ's truth is the law of the heart, the most perfect truth about the human person. If we who have recognized him do not bring his presence into the world, who will? ❖

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Ponder In Your Heart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Have you ever met someone who has caused an experience of wonder? (p. 1 and 2)

- How was this person an "unexpected encounter"?
- How did you respond?

Do you experience Sunday as a day of wonder with your family? (p. 3)

- At Mass, how can we, like Mary, respond in wonder to "God's unutterable grace"? (See "Mary's Wonder")
- How does "keeping the Sabbath holy" feed our experience of wonder?

How is being a great lover of your family a source of wonder? (p. 4)

- Have you encountered a saint whose life fills you with wonder?
- Have you ever experienced the Lord attempting to use you as his wondrous sign? If not, would you be open?

Do the Church's rituals create a sense of wonder in your life? (p. 5)

- What sacramental or spiritual ritual have you found most helpful as a link to the divine?
- How do the children in your life challenge you to live more fully the wonder of life with Christ?

What groups in your parish evoke wonder? (p. 6)

- How can these groups offer a genuine "come and see"?
- Why are prayer, praise and study with friends such a source of wonder?

What is the relationship between half-truths and the cynical world? (p. 7)

- What are some of the practical ways you can bring Christ's truth to the political process?
- What are you tempted to be the most cynical about? How can the wonder of Christ overcome this cynicism?